

魔女の旅々 2

THE JOURNEY OF ELAINA

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著 白石定規
イラスト あずーよ

「にああ」

「我慢してください……、
私だって、辛いのを堪えてるんです」



A character with long white hair and a dark cloak is running through a forest. The character is wearing a brown bag and has a determined expression. The background is a lush green forest with a stream and a small bridge. The text is overlaid on the image.

「生きて帰すな！」

「ネコ神さまを返せ——！」

彼女は魔女であり、旅人でもあるのです。

She is a witch and is also a traveler.

灰の魔女イレイナ

若くして魔法使いの最高位「魔女」となった少女。
幼いころ読んだ『ニケの冒険譚』に憧れ、旅人となる。



THE JOURNEY OF ELAINA

CHARACTER

シヨコラ

風車の都の王女。
政略結婚から逃げ出し、
「怖い人」に追われている。

ロザミア

シヨコラ王女に仕える、優秀な女騎士。
逃げ出したシヨコラを捜している。



エリーゼ

とある雪深い国に暮らす獣人の少女。
迫害を受けているところを
イレイナに助けられる。



アナ

「死者の楽園」という国の技術者。
グールに関する研究に携わっている。



ネコ神さま

猫を溺愛する国で
出会う謎の生物(?)。
かなりの長寿で、
人語を話すことができる。



Prologue

It was raining on the spring plains.

The modestly falling raindrops made a quiet sound as they wet the grasslands and the top of a tree that stood on a gently sloping hill.

“...Ah, it’s really starting to come down.”

A young witch stood beneath that single tree, staring blankly at the sky that had turned grey in color. She had silky long hair that had the same hue as the clouds in the sky, and she wore a black robe, a black tricorne, and a star-shaped brooch that was the proof of her being a witch.

She had a broom by her side, and directly below it was a large piece of luggage. She was a witch, as well as a traveler.

“...What should I do?”

She was perplexed. Should she keep going, or just keep standing here?

As she was a witch, if she felt like it, it would have been possible for her to keep flying on her broom while using magic to keep the rain away.

“.....”

However, she lost the desire to use such methods after watching the rain for a while.

She saw a thin ray of sunlight break through the cloudy sky in the distance, as if peeking from behind a curtain. The gloomy land received the light and began to shine brightly. Even the raindrops that were falling incessantly were reflecting that light. They were glittering as they fell from high in the sky.

It was a sunshower.

“...I guess I’ll take a break for a while before going on.”

Who was this witch who was entranced by the spectacle that unfolded before her eyes?

That's right, it was me.

Chapter 1: A Country for Magicians

Sunlight is falling upon the plains through the gaps that opened up between the clouds. The plants in the sunlit patches were caressed by a gentle wind, and they shook off the raindrops that clung to them.

If you move through those sunlit patches, your body will be enveloped by the warmth for just a moment. I felt that it was warm for just a moment, but the next instant, I was once again beneath the cloudy sky. I wish that bright patch of land would keep pace with me, however, it was beyond my reach before I realized it.

Although it's been a while since the rain stopped, the air is still humid and carries a hint of cold. It feels like the clouds will cover up the sun again at any moment, and the rain will begin to fall again.

“.....”

I hate the rain. It makes everything damp and soggy, just being there makes me feel depressed, and most importantly, it forces me to temporarily halt my journey. It's really the worst. However, I like jumping into the puddles that are left behind once the rain stops and splashing the water around with my feet. I hate the rain, but I love the time that immediately follows the rain. It feels weird. This is troubling.

It looks like it's going to rain, so I have no option but to hurry. I made the broom go fast while feeling slightly impatient.

After flying for a while, a country came into view. A gate guard appeared to greet me soon after I landed the broom outside the gates.

However, it was unusual for the guard to be wearing a tricorne and a robe instead of the equipment of a regular guard.

“Welcome to our country. Are you a witch-sama?”

Isn't it obvious just by looking?

“Yes. I’m a traveling witch.”

“Haha, I see. You’re quite young for a witch-sama.”

After saying that and nodding as if praising me, the guard continued to speak.

“Would you be so kind as to tell me your name?”

“It’s Elaina.”

“Would you be so kind as to tell me if you have a lover?”

“Excuse me?”

I unintentionally replied with a question of my own. Is this person really trying to hit on me in a place like this?

However, it appears that there is a different reason. The guard slightly shook his head, and,

“My apologies. I didn’t ask that with any vulgar intentions. However, if you have a lover who is not a magician, staying in this country will cause you to have some unpleasant memories.”

“.....?”

“So, how is it? Is there anyone you’re going out with right now?”

The explanation is somewhat unsatisfactory, but I’ll understand what it means soon enough once I’m inside the country. Probably.

“...No, there isn’t anyone.”

After hearing that, the guard nodded and said,

“I understand. In that case, please feel free to enter.”

The guard moved away from the gate, and the large iron gate opened while making the ground solemnly tremble.

“Welcome, to the Country for Magicians.”

As I stepped foot inside, the guard bowed low and said that to me.

After passing through the gate, I saw the city's main street. There were many houses and shops of different size and structure lining the sides of the road.

From what I could see, the city was full of magicians. They were walking together with other people, or doing some shopping. Looking into the shops that lined the street, I saw that magicians were living a completely ordinary life.

However, there were people who were not magicians as well. They walked on the side of the street, avoided taking a path that might might cause them to obstruct the magicians, and hung their heads... In short, they were being a lot more humble than they should. Their clothes were also quite seedy.

It feels like this country only has people who are dressed in expensive-looking robes or people wearing cheap, threadbare clothing.

This country seems to be a little strange. I started to walk while thinking that. After walking for awhile, I came to a sudden stop. There's something strange here.

“...What is that?”

Those were the first words that came out of my mouth.

A mysterious box of the kind I had never seen before had been placed on long strips of iron, and it was moving. Even more surprisingly, that large box was filled with people.

I realized that it was a means of transportation when that box stopped in front of me. A flood of people stepped out of the box once the doors opened. At the same time, a number of other people also entered the box.

It looks like many people use this means of transportation. How interesting.

It really looks interesting.

Should I try riding it?

Let's try it out.

I didn't really understand what was going on, but I decided to go ahead and ride it. I sidestepped the people and approached the box while fighting against the flow of people.

However, it remained at just being an attempt at boarding, as I was not actually able to enter the box... I was stopped just as I was about enter.

"You can't."

"Gueh."

I made a strange sound. Someone had strongly pulled on my robe from behind.

What the hell is this person doing all of a sudden? I turned around while feeling a bit angry, and saw a witch standing there.

She was a strange witch, with a suspicious-looking smirk on her face.

"What are you doing all of a sudden?"

"You're a magician, aren't you? You can't enter the first carriage. It's not allowed."

I was full of anger, but the witch ignored me and continued to flap her gums.

"You belong in that carriage."

Saying that, the witch pointed at a carriage, as she called it, that was behind the one I had tried to enter.

However,

"...But there's no one else in that carriage."

"Yes, there's nobody else there. There's a good reason for that, though. So board that carriage, please."

“I’m allowed to board that carriage but not this one?”

“Of course. I’ll explain the reason to you later, so come with me for now.”

“Ha...”

I don’t understand what she’s talking about at all.

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Apparently, that lady was the person who had created this moving box, and it’s called a ‘train’. When I asked her how exactly it was moving, she gladly explained it to me.

However, I didn’t understand a thing she said. I felt like my head was about to explode from the relentless waves of technical terms she spouted. The only thing I managed to understand was that “This train moves using magic as the driving power”, the rest of it went right over my head.

Well, it should be fine even if I don’t understand it.

“Right now, I’m traveling to conduct an interview with the first magician to ride this train.”

“Oh, I see.”

I gave a meaningless reply while sitting with my legs stretched out on the long sofa that was installed in the train.

“Traveler-san, how does the ride feel?”

“It’s quiet.”

Looking out of the window, I saw a commonplace sight of a city moving by. In spite of being such a grandly-built box, it wasn’t moving all that fast, and I felt that it was slower compared to when I flew on my broom.

Maybe because of that, the interior of the train was really quiet. As a means of transportation, it was not a bad feeling.

“I know, right? I invented this so that people could go sightseeing around the town while viewing beautiful and interesting sights, it’s something I have a lot of confidence in.”

“Ah.”

“But the reviews from magicians haven’t been all that great... A lot of magicians used it at the beginning, but by the time I realized it, they stopped using it altogether.”

“That makes sense.”

It’s slow, after all.

“By the way, you’re the first customer today. Welcome to my train.”

“The first...?”

I sunk lower into my seat while wondering what this person was talking about. Looking in the direction that the train was moving, I could see a carriage that was full of people.

There are so many people riding this train, and yet I’m the first customer?

Why was that?

“Ara.”

The lady looked in same direction and said,

“The ones in that carriage are not customers. You can ignore them.”

“Ignore them... saying that just makes me more curious. If they’re not customers, then what are they?”

After that, the lady said this.

“Hmm? They are lesser beings. They’re not humans, so I can’t call them ‘customers’”.

“.....”

“You probably don’t know this because you’re from a different country, but people in this country who can’t use magic are not considered human. They’re the same as animals.”

“...Saying it that way is a little extreme.”

So they’re treated like animals just because they can’t use magic.

The lady continued to speak while looking at the carriage in front.

“Look at them. Don’t you think they’re pitiful? Unlike magicians, they have no other means of transportation, so they all travel in this train bunched up like that. Isn’t it funny?”

“...I don’t think it’s particularly funny.”

“Really? This train was really popular in the beginning, though. The lesser beings would travel in that carriage, and we would travel in this carriage so that we could watch them. Watching their pitiful state was a great source of amusement. This train was famous for being a good way to get rid of accumulated stress in that way.”

“Lesser beings...?”

I remember reading about it in a book a long time ago. If I remember correctly, that was a derogatory term used by magicians to refer to people who couldn’t use magic. It’s shocking to see that there’s actually a country that uses this term.

“Popularity fades with time, though. Now, the only customers I get are people like yourself who visit from other countries.”

“...That makes sense.”

“What do you think I should do to get people to ride this train again? Maybe the people need more excitement?”

“Why not move away from the idea that it has to be exciting?”

“If I did that, this train would lose its reason for existing.”

“.....”

“So, any ideas?”

“Nope.”

“You sound like you don’t care at all.”

“Well yeah, I don’t care about it at all.”

“Don’t say that. I really need an idea. At this rate, the train will be shut down.”

“An idea, huh...”

I don’t particularly have any, though.

“Don’t you have any to share? It can even just be your impressions after riding this train.”

“...Ah, in that case, I have something for you.”

“What is it?”

I had already decided on what to say.

I moved my sight from the boring and unchanging scenery outside to the face of the witch who had a flimsy smile on her face, and said it clearly.

My honest opinion, in a condensed form.

“Unpleasant.”

However, the lady didn’t look like she minded it much, and,

“Unpleasant... I see.”

She drifted off into thought in that manner.

○

From the next day on, it started to rain heavily.

I couldn't even go outside to see the country, so I lived inside an inn for a while. Although it was a cheap inn, I was able to live there quite well.

However, I had nothing to do, and the time spent sitting around in that humid atmosphere was more boring than I had expected. It was at a level where I began to worry if moss might start to grow on me as well.

In the end, the rain showed no signs of stopping even after waiting for a few days, so I decided to leave the country even though it was still raining.

As I was walking down the street that lead to the gates while holding an umbrella in the incessant downpour of rain that I hated, the train slowly passed by me. The train was moving at a speed only a little faster than I was walking, and it came to a stop a little ahead of me.

“Ugh...”

After the doors opened and a lot of people were expelled from the inside,

“Oh, it's the witch from the other day. How are you? Nice weather we're having, isn't it?”

I ran into that inventor witch again.

“You call this good weather?”

“Sure it is. My train is really proving its worth, after all. What else can I call it, if not good weather?”

“It appears that we have differing values.”

Leaving that aside,

“However, it does look like you're getting a lot of customers now. A lot of the customers who hadn't been riding your train earlier have come back, I see.”

I said that while taking a peek at the carriage behind her. It was packed with magicians. The people getting out of the train and the people boarding the train were all magicians.

The lady realized what I was looking at, and gave a big nod.

“Yes! So many magicians have returned to my train, and it’s all thanks to you!”

“Me?”

Did I do something like that?

I gave her my frank opinion, but I don’t remember doing anything that I should be thanked for. Just what was this lady talking about?

While I was standing there under my umbrella with an increasing number of doubts, the lady said,

“Just like you said, I got rid of the unpleasant things from my train, and the customers all came back!”

After saying that, she stepped to one side and continued to speak.

“Look, I removed the carriage meant for lesser beings, and turned the whole thing into a train reserved for only magicians!”

She laughed after saying that.

“.....”

There were magicians in the carriage behind her. The first carriage, and all the others, were also full of magicians.

“I guess having lesser beings traveling in the same train as us was too absurd a notion. There’s nothing more unpleasant than that. I didn’t realize that. It was a complete blind spot. Thank you, Witch-san.”

“.....”

“My train is really popular now. We can ride on the train and laugh at the pitiful state of the lesser beings who are walking while getting drenched in the rain. It’s a good way to get rid of the accumulated stress, they say.”

“...I see.”

The magicians who got out of the train had spread out on the street while holding umbrellas.

There were people who were running by while vainly attempting to use a piece of cloth to protect themselves from the rain, and people who were running while almost bent over double, trying to protect the items that they were hugging close to their stomach.

The magicians sneered at such people as they walked, spreading out into the city.

“What do you say, Witch-san? Do you want to take a ride while looking at those pitiful wretches from inside the train?”

I shook my head.

“I don’t have such a spiteful hobby.”

“Oh, that’s a pity. We have different interests.”

I shook my head once again.

I gave a sigh, and spoke while looking at the rain that I hated so much.

“No, we have different values.”

Different from this country, and you as well.

Chapter 2: A peaceful way to use weapons

“Eh? Haa... You want me to make your spears and shields the strongest...?”

“Tha’s right! Or else we’ll be sent a-runnin’ by those guys from the village to the east!”

The men of the village had gathered before me, kneeling down and looking at me with anxious eyes. Next to them was a pile of crude spears fashioned by attaching knives to some tree branches, and lids of pots that looked useless for protection from anything other than a cookfire. It looked like a pile of garbage.

They want me to make these the strongest weapons? Hoho.

“No, that’s a little...”

“Please, we’re countin’ on ya! Those guys from the village in the east, they seem to have got help from a witch who made all their weapons super strong! They’ll kill all o’ us at this rate!”

I don’t understand the circumstances, but apparently this western village is on pretty bad terms with the neighboring village to the east. After a while, it had become a situation where everyone thought, “Aw, let’s just settle it with fightin’.”

However, none of their weapons were anything special, so they decided to appeal to a witch for help with increasing their combative ability so that they could put up a fight.

And unluckily enough, I happened to run into them at that time. That’s what happened.

“Umm, well, it’s not impossible. Making your weapons stronger, that is.”

“Not ‘stronger’! They’ve gotta be the strongest!”

Agreeing with the words of the man who appeared to be their leader, the other few dozens of men surrounding me nodded while breathing strongly through their noses. Ugh, they reek of sweat.

“Making them the strongest weapons is also simple... but there’s one problem.”

“Wuzzat?”

“Can you pay for them? I don’t mind making them for you, but it’ll be quite expensive, you know?”

“But the person who made them weapons for those guys in the other village did it for free! So we oughta—”

“Perhaps we should forget that we had this conversation?”

“.....”

“Well, what will it be?”

“...How much money are we talkin’, exactly?”

“.....”

I silently held up my index finger.

“Wow! Just one copper!? That’s a bargain!”

“If you want me to strengthen your weapons, I’ll do it for one gold coin.”

“You’ll strengthen all o’ our weapons fer a gold? That’s really quite the bargain!”

“It’s one gold coin per item.”

“That’s not cheap at all...”

“That’s why I said it would be pretty expensive...”

Judging by the number of items in that pile of trash, just strengthening the weapons alone will earn me around eighty gold coins... Oh my, the trash is starting to look like a pile of shining gold. Ufufu.

However, seeing as they were only able to gather junk like this for weapons, this village must be in dire straits financially as well. The men surrounding me were visibly falling into despair.

“C-Can’t you find it in yer heart to do it for less, Witch-sama...?”

“No, I can’t possibly make it any cheaper than this.”

“...T-That’s right! Maybe we could pay ya afterwards! After you make the strongest weapons for us, we’ll run over to the eastern village and loot all their gold! How’s that sound?”

“Ah, I’m sorry. Please pay in advance for strengthening the weapons.”

“...Why?”

“My motivation depends on it.”

“But payin’ ahead is really impossible...”

The person who appeared to be the leader hung his head and said,

“Would you be willin’ to accept somethin’ else of equal value?”

“That would depend on what you have to offer.”

“Seriously!? Alright, you guys! Go bring that! ”

After responding with a hearty “Yes sir!” the people who appeared to be subordinates spread out and disappeared from my sight.

And then they returned while bringing “that”.

I had been waiting for them to return, and what they respectfully offered me was a large quantity of vegetables. It’s impossible for a single person to carry that many. With this many vegetables, I feel like I would be able to live for a month eating nothing else.

“These are pickin’s of vegetables grown in our village! Please take ‘em!”

“...No, receiving so many vegetables would be troublesome.”

I can only imagine them going bad before I could deal with them.

“Please take ‘em!”

“.....”

I let out a single sigh.

“Let’s forget about this conversation. Not only can you not afford to pay me, you want to give me something like this instead. I have no obligation to strengthen your weapons under such circumstances.”

“...Please wait, Witch-sama!”

The person who called out to me after I made my curt statement was the wife of the person who appeared to be the leader.

The lady spoke to me while turning cold eyes upon the men who were wallowing in despair.

“We have prepared a special feast for you, Witch-sama. Can you not accept that as payment for this matter?”

“Ho.”

“When did ya... As expected from my wife!”

The person who appeared to be the leader was pushing his luck.

The lady gave him a stern glare, then turned to me and smiled.

“What do you say, Witch-sama?”

I replied,

“It depends on what you have to offer.”

I decided to at least take a look, and accompanied the lady to the communal area of the village. It looked like a shabby, run-down building from the outside. It was so bad that I hesitated to go inside.

However, the lady didn't allow me to escape. Saying, "Please come in!" she half-dragged me into the building.

"....."

What was the interior like, you ask?

It was a wonderful dining hall. Freshly picked fruit and vegetables lined the tables and a fragrant smell spread throughout the entire building. It looked like they were still in the process of preparing, as a number of ladies were busily moving about inside.

In an attempt to improve the appearance of the run-down building even a little, the walls on the inside were hidden by curtains. It looked like the ladies had all brought their own curtains as they were of different sizes and materials, but the sheer amount of work that went into the preparation made me feel sympathy for them.

However, there was one problem.

As none of the pots had lids, the food would get cold if we didn't hurry. In fact, it was already getting cold by the time I arrived. What a pity that was.

Due to that, the situation had become urgent.

"Let's strengthen your weapons right away."

After going back to where the men were waiting, I went to work right away.

I ignored the men who were jumping with joy, took out my staff, and cast a spell on the pile of shabbily made weapons.

The results appeared immediately. A soft, sparkling light enveloped the weapons and started to change their structure. By the time the light disappeared, the weapons had been reborn in a completely different shape.

“T-This is! Amazin’, Witch-sama!”

The men were ecstatic after looking at the weapons that had been remade.

The crude spears that had been made by attaching knives to some tree branches were reborn as halberds with beautiful blades that looked like they were made of ice, and the ordinary pot lids obtained an intimidating shape that looked like they could be used to batter the enemy to pieces by themselves.

That’s right, the pile of trash turned into a pile of treasure. It’s understandable that the men are so moved.

“Incidentally, these strong weapons are all lighter than they appear. You’ll realise that when you pick them up. However they have one drawback—”

“Alright! Now we’re sure ta win!!”

Ah, they’re not listening to me at all.

“Umm...”

“Right, men! We’re going to give them folk from the eastern village a beatin’ right away! Afta’ me!”

The men moved to pick up the weapons.

“Umm...”

“Pick up them weapons! Don’t let Witch-sama’s work go ta waste!”

Saying that, they gathered at the gate.

“.....”

“Thankee, Witch-sama! We’ll definitely win and come back!”

After bowing to me once, they ran off towards the eastern village.

“.....”

I was left behind there by myself.

I didn't foresee this outcome.

"Hmm..."

As they are using the strongest weapons and shields, at the very least, I would have liked for them to go about it more carefully. At this rate, they might end up using them wrongly. Perhaps it would be better to go and stop them.

I was hesitating.

"Witch-sama. We have finished preparing the venue."

"Ah, I'm on my way."

Oh well, it should be fine. It'll probably end up the way I expect even if I leave them alone.

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"Witch-sama, thank you so much. Now the village will become peaceful."

"Not at all. I didn't do anything that great."

I shook my head while loading my plate with food. The only thing I did was alter the weapons a bit. It's not something that requires gratitude.

"By the way, this is your reward."

Saying so, the wife of the person who appeared to be the leader gave me a wrapped package.

"Thank you."

"That contains ten gold coins. It's the rest of your reward."

I took a peek inside. As she said, there are ten golden coins inside. Ufufu.

I took off my tricorne and bowed to her.

"Thank you very much."

"We should be the ones thanking you. At last, peace will come to both the villages."

“Right.”

“Now, please eat.”

“You’re right... It looks like I don’t have that much time.”

This is why I wanted to properly explain it to those guys before coming here. Oh well, it doesn’t matter. I picked up my knife and fork and lightly cut my portion.

The men returned quite a while after that. I had eaten my fill, left the communal area, and had just taken off on my broom when they arrived.

Their attitude was clearly different from when they had left the village.

They weren’t carrying the spears or shields that I had made, and incidentally, there were about twice as many people compared to when they left. They saw me sitting on my broom with my legs swaying below, and shouted at me.

“What’s the meanin’ of this, Witch-sama!?”

“The spears and shields all broke afta’ one hit!”

“Don’t mess with us! This is a scam!”

“Return the coin!”

“Return our knives and pot coverins’!”

“And them branches too!”

“What’s the meaning o’ this? Explain yourself!”

Oh my.

“Just as you asked, I created the strongest weapons for you. Are you dissatisfied?”

“We’re more than only troubled! When we were about to fight, we saw the folk of the eastern village had the same weapons!”

The leader of this village shouted that.

“Did you trick us, Witch-sama!? They looked good, but they were so darned brittle! The spears and shields crumbled to pieces the moment we clashed!”

The leader of the other village also shouted that.

Oh, that’s terrible.

“No, the more powerful something is, the more brittle it becomes. Isn’t the same true for gemstones as well?”

That’s what I told them.

“Besides, if the strongest spear and strongest shield clash, of course both of them will be destroyed. Both are the strongest, after all.”

Seeing me making light of the situation, the leader of this village said,

“But Witch-sama, you hid the fact that the weapons were brittle from us!”

“No, you lot were just too hasty and left before I could say anything.”

I had initially planned to explain that the weapons were brittle, and then allow the two villages to have a decisive fight, but because they ran away without listening to me, I had to hurry and eat quickly. How can they make up for this?

“Speaking o’ which, Witch-sama, yer the one who provided the eastern village with weapons?”

“Hmm? Didn’t I mention that?”

Indeed, a few days ago I had visited the eastern village who were at odds with this village. I had used the same method to convert a similar pile of garbage into the strongest weapons.

Oh well, putting that aside for now.

“I properly completed the work that had been requested of me. I have also received the reward, so I’ll be leaving now.”

I gently accelerated my broom and began to move forward.

The abuse that came flying at me from below increased in intensity, and a few of them even threw stones. Not that any of them hit me.

“Well then, farewell~”

What actually happened, was this.

The dangerous request to make the strongest weapons was not my only task. In fact, it would not be wrong to call that just one of the methods to achieve what was originally requested of me.

To be honest, my original task was to “confiscate the weapons from the men of the two villages who were on bad terms”.

That is why I used my magic to remove the weapons from the hands of the men.

It looks like the men are on better terms now that they have me as a common enemy, so it's two birds with one stone. However, they lost some money, their knives, and pot lids as payment for that.

Even then, that is a cheap price to pay for being able to end the fighting in a peaceful manner.

I could still hear the complaints from the crowd that was becoming distant.

Behind them, I was able to faintly make out the forms of my clients from both villages waving their hands at me.

Chapter 3: A fleeing princess. Who is chasing her?

It was a forest in autumn with the trees shedding their leaves. The bright crimson leaves fell to the ground slowly and gently, covering the path that linked two countries and turning it a deep shade of red.

A single girl was walking along the path which looked like it had been covered by a red carpet.

A black robe, as well as a black tricorne. A brooch shaped like a star on her chest. As it was a cold season, her thin legs were covered by black tights.

This girl who wore quintessential witch's attire was a witch, as well as a traveler.

“...Fu.”

The girl stopped, and looked upwards. What she saw there was a clear blue sky.

The girl who stood there with melancholy hidden in her eyes was definitely a beauty by any standards. So beautiful, in fact, that anyone who happened to pass by would be knocked out by her beauty. Whether it was a man or a woman, they would probably become enamoured with her. Is this what was meant by indiscriminate terrorism?

Who was this girl who held such a murderous level of beauty?

Yes, it's me.

“.....”

Ah, it's a joke, okay?

○

I would usually travel from one country to another by flying on a broom like a proper witch, but I didn't do that this time. I felt that it would be a waste to just pass over this path which was surrounded by such wonderful scenery.

Another reason was that I simply didn't want to fly since it was cold.

“.....”

Moreover, the last country I visited... was it called the Watermill Capital? I learned that the next country was close enough to reach by taking a short walk along this path.

That country should be coming into view any time now.

If I remember the correctly, the next country is...

“Oh, my.”

My thinking came to a halt. Before I realized it, I had also stopped walking.

I saw a person coming down this path from the other side. It was a man riding a horse. The horse was ambling down the middle of the road in a relaxed manner.

He noticed my gaze and flashed a smile at me. He had blond hair and blue eyes. He also wore clothing that looked very expensive, and looked like a gentle-hearted young man.

If he was just an ordinary man with a good looking face, I wouldn't have stopped walking and thinking, and stared at him. At the most, I would have nodded as we passed each other by.

“Hello there. Nice weather we're having isn't it... As greetings go, this one probably lacks originality.”

However, the person who stopped his horse in front of me was clearly special.

Should I say special, or rather he is is definitely,

“A Prince?”

That's what he looked like.

He put on a gentle smile and nodded.

“Oh, do you know who I am?”

“That coat of arms on your chest, I saw it in the Watermill Capital.”

“I see. As you guessed, I am the Prince of the Watermill Capital. My name is Robert. It’s nice to meet you, Witch-sama.”

He let go of the reins with one hand, and extended that hand towards me.

So he’s looking for a handshake? I see.

I held his hand, said “Hello,” and released it.

“Considering that we’ve met here, are you perhaps on your way from the Watermill Capital to the Windmill Capital?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

I answered in the affirmative.

This road was a single path that connected the two countries. The country I stayed at earlier was the Watermill Capital. The country I am heading towards is the Windmill Capital. This path was a trading route between the two.

“What did you think of my country?”

“There were a lot of watermills.”

“.....”

“.....”

“...Eh? Is that all?”

“Well, yes.”

There was nothing else special to talk about, in any case.

“I-I see... So that’s all...”

Half-ignoring the state of the Prince who looked depressed, I asked him a question.

“By the way, Prince Robert. Considering that we met here, are you perhaps on your way back to the Watermill Capital from the Windmill Capital?”

“Eh? Yes... Wait, that’s not entirely correct.”

“What do you mean?”

“I am searching for my fiancée.”

Hoho.

“I’m a traveler, so I’m not interested in marriage.”

“What are you talking about...”

Prince Robert was clearly taken aback.

“My fiancée has vanished.”

“Vanished... you say?”

She didn’t just run away?

Prince Robert nodded.

“In truth, I was due to be wed soon, but my partner is the princess of the Windmill Capital. So we had to bring her to the Watermill Capital so that we could conduct the ceremony.”

“Hoho.”

So his partner is a princess from the neighbouring country. That’s pretty amazing.

“Some people in their country apparently didn’t like the idea of her marrying me, so when I went to the Windmill Capital this morning, they were on the verge of marrying her off to some other fellow.”

“.....”

The masked expression he had prepared began to crumble.

“She was crying. She probably hated the thought of marrying that man. After seeing that, I threw away my position as a Prince and forcefully brought her away.”

“Haa...”

My, what a romantic turn of events.

“When we left the Windmill Capital, I put her on a sled and pulled her behind me as I galloped out on my horse.”

“A sled?”

What is she, luggage?

“And that’s when it happened. When I looked back after coming some way, she was nowhere to be seen. I’m certain that she was sitting on the sled and eating a croissant when we left the Windmill Capital together.”

“Maybe she fell off?”

“Yeah... That’s why I’m searching for her.”

“I see.”

Was she kidnapped, was it an accident, or did she run away? Which one was it? Judging by his story, it seems likely that the sled and the princess were accidentally dropped somewhere along the path.

It’s hard to make any sort of judgement at this moment.

“The princess of the Windmill Capital... She is a beautiful young lady with wavy blonde hair and fiery red eyes. Have you seen anyone matching that description?”

“I’ve been walking on this path starting from the Watermill Capital, but you’re the first person I’ve met, Your Highness.”

I told him truthfully.

He sadly lowered his eyebrows a little, and said,

“...I see.”

It feels like the situation is somewhat complicated. Marriage with a princess of a neighboring country, it's obvious that there's something else going on in the background.

For example, it might be a political marriage for the purpose of uniting the two countries.

“Where did you first meet the Princess?”

I asked him in a roundabout manner.

“Hmm? I saw her at the party celebrating ten years of peace after the war ended, and fell in love with her at first sight.”

“Hoho, did you say end of a war? Hoho. The Watermill Capital and the Windmill Capital were once at war? I see.”

So it was a political marriage after all?

“Well, that was more than ten years ago. Both Watermill and Windmill didn't like the idea of having a similar existence nearby, so war broke out.”

“Even though they were both similar?”

“It was because they were too similar. Wouldn't you feel disturbed if someone similar to you was beside you all the time? Due to that reason, the two countries would easily get into a fight over trivial issues, and in the end they went to war... This path that we are standing on was the place where fighting was the fiercest during the war. At one point, the ground was drenched with the blood of the soldiers, and it was even called the 'Trading Route of Blood' for some time.”

“...That's a pretty distasteful name.”

I unintentionally glanced downwards and saw the trading route that was deep red in color. However, it wasn't blood that gave it that color, but the fallen leaves.

It was a vivid and elegant red color.

“It took a lot of time before the two countries were able to respect each other, but peace finally arrived. If the two of us were to get married, the good relations between the two countries should get even better.”

“Did the Princess see it that way as well?”

“Of course. She wouldn’t have agreed to the engagement otherwise.”

“...Fumu.”

I see.

I had thought that Prince Robert had forced her into marrying him and she had run away because she was against it, but... it looks like that isn’t the case.

I nodded.

“If I see her anywhere, I will tell her about you.”

I said that while looking up at him.

“Ah, thanks. If you do see her, please ask her to come to the Watermill Capital. We need to have that wedding ceremony, after all.”

And then Prince Robert continued to speak.

“Ah, that’s right. If you find her, I will give you ten gold coins as a reward.”

Oh, my.

“I understand. I will spare no effort in searching for her.”

“I’ll leave it to you, then.”

“Yes, you can count on me.”

I wasn’t swayed by the promise of money. I just wanted to help the prince out. No, honest.

.....

Still, rich people use such dirty methods. They have the strongest weapon called ‘wealth’, so they can handle pretty much anything that comes their way.

That’s what I thought while watching Prince Robert from behind as he elegantly moved away from me.

○

A short while after parting with Prince Robert, I saw another person on the path that I was walking on. I felt that staring at them would be rude, so I discreetly peeked at the person from the corner of my eyes.

“.....”

It was a beautiful lady. However, I’m certain that this isn’t the Princess of the Windmill Capital... her appearance is entirely too different.

Her long, straight hair was fiery red in color. She wasn’t wearing a dress like what you would expect from a princess, but an ominous-looking set of red armour. Rounding off the dangerous vibe, she had a sword at her waist.

A red-haired woman standing on this red-colored path while wearing red armour. This was the lady who walked past me.

Yep, she looks dangerous.

“You there.”

...is what she said.

I heard a sharp voice that felt as if it was stabbing into me from behind. I stopped walking and turned around.

“Can I help you?”

“You looked at me just now, didn’t you? Did you want something from me?”

“No, not really. I was just a little curious.”

“Curious? About what?”

I lowered my gaze and looked at her armour.

“If you meet someone walking normally down a path while wearing such dangerous looking attire, isn’t it only normal to feel curious?”

“You can just ignore them.”

“That’s not what I’m talking about.”

“.....”

“...Is something wrong?”

I asked her shamelessly, even though I already knew the answer.

She came from the direction of the Windmill Capital. Judging by the fact that she is wearing armour, it is unlikely that she is a wandering traveler. Also, judging by the fact that she is wearing armour, I can further speculate that she is a guard of some sort.

In short,

“Actually, the Princess of our country has vanished.”

That was the situation.

“Vanished? Oh my, that sounds serious.”

“Do you know anything? She is a beauty and her wavy golden hair is her characteristic feature.”

“No, I have no idea.”

I haven’t seen any young woman matching that description.... But it really looks like there is a fairly large rebellion going on. At this rate, I won’t be able to rest peacefully even after reaching the Windmill Capital. There’s a possibility that the whole country has fallen into panic.

The lady furrowed her eyebrows and opened her mouth to speak, saying,

“...I see. If you happen to find the Princess, please bring her to the Windmill Capital.”

Oh, that’s in the direction opposite of where Prince Robert is waiting.

.....

I gave her a big nod.

“Of course, I’ll make sure to do that. By the way, what’s your name?”

“It’s Rosamia.”

“In that case, I’ll bring her to you if I happen to find her, Rosamia-san.”

“Thanks.”

“No problem.”

I’m not completely sure what’s going on, though.

○

I’m hungry.

Is it time for lunch already?

“.....”

For some reason, my sense of smell becomes extra sensitive when I’m hungry. Even in this stinging cold weather, if the air carries the scent of food, I’ll notice it right away.

I will notice it and think “Ah, something smells good”.

“.....”

Anyways, I was standing still after having caught the scent of food coming from somewhere. It’s smells really good.

What is this smell... Ah, it’s bread. It’s the scent of bread. The distinctive smell of bread, slightly sweet and mellow, is spreading through the air.

“There are no people in front or behind me... which means...”

Searching for the source of the smell, I stepped off the path and walked into the brush.

The bread is certainly somewhere in this direction. Each time I take a step, the thick plants shake while making noise and the scent gets stronger.

And then...

“Hmm... !”

Within the thicket, at the base of a tree.

I found a young lady sitting there and looking in my direction with a startled expression while still holding a croissant in her mouth.

On her lap, she had a basket that held a large number of croissants. Her body was enveloped in an expensive looking wedding dress, and she had wavy blonde hair. Her deep red eyes were fixed upon me.

...Wow.

I came here while following a good smell, and happened to run into an extraordinary person.

“You’re the Princess, aren’t you? From Windmill Capital.”

“.....!”

The girl’s shoulders shuddered sharply, and she munched on the remnants of the croissant in her hand.

Is that more important than replying to my question? I see how it is.

The girl swallowed the croissant after munching on it for a while, and then glared at me.

“Who are you? You should introduce yourself before asking for someone else’s name. How rude.”

I don't remember asking for her name, though. I just asked for confirmation.

"...I'm the Witch of Ashes, Elaina. I'm a traveler."

"I see. Elaina... that's a nice name. My name is Chocola. As you guessed, I am the Princess of Windmill Capital."

"You're the princess of a country, what are you doing in a place like this?"

"Can't you see? I'm having lunch."

"By the way, may I have one of those croissants?"

"Ah, go ahead."

"Thank you."

Sitting in the shade of the tree next to Princess Chocola, I asked about the circumstances surrounding her while nibbling the croissant.

I'll keep the fact that I met her fiancé, Prince Robert, a secret for now. I haven't yet discarded the possibility that this is a political marriage. I wasn't suspecting him or anything, but I felt that this would be the best method in order to find out what the two of them really thought about the matter.

I started by asking a simple question.

"Aren't you going to go back to your country?"

"I'm being pursued by a scary person. I can't go back even if I wanted to."

"...A scary person?"

"Yes. A scary person who wants to destroy my happiness."

Fumu.

This matches with what I've heard from Prince Robert as well. In other words...

"Could it be that this is the person who tried to forcefully marry you?"

"Yes, that's the person... You know about it?"

“Well, yes. I’ve heard some rumors about the incident.”

“...Who told you, may I ask?”

I saw that Princess Chocola’s posture changed slightly.

She wanted to marry the prince of a neighboring country, but someone from her own country—to use her own words, a scary person who wanted to destroy her happiness—had appeared, so of course she would be on her guard. Seeing as the person was from her own country, there might be more than one enemy.

Oh my, this might be bad.

Let me correct her misunderstanding.

“Please don’t worry. I heard this from your lover.”

“Oh, I see. That’s a relief.”

The girl patted her chest in relief and took another bite of croissant. Induced by her, I took a bite as well.

Well then, let’s ask more questions.

“Aren’t you going to go where your lover is waiting?”

“The scary person might be wandering around this place, correct? That’s why I’m waiting here.”

“While eating croissants?”

“Yes.”

“The smell will give away your position, though.”

“As far as I know, you’re the only monster who can track down the smell of croissants.”

“That’s not true.”

How rude.

“I mean, does this give off a strong scent to you?”

Saying that, Princess Chocola brought the croissant piece in her hand near my nose.

So I ate it.

“Delicious.”

“...Why did you eat mine?”

“The grass always looks greener on the other side.”

“The ‘grass’ is exactly the same.”

“All the more reason why it looks better.”

Just like how two neighbouring countries could get into a fight because they were similar.

I finished eating the remnants of the croissant that was in my hand, and stood up.

“Right then, enough joking. Shall we go?”

Princess Chocola looked at me,

“...Go where?”

And asked that in an anxious voice.

“Didn’t you hear what I said earlier? I’m going to wait for my lover right here. I don’t want to meet the scary person.”

“If you keep staying in this place, though, that scary person might find you, you know?”

“.....”

“Your lover has asked me to bring you to them if I happened to find you, Your Highness.”

I stretched my hand out towards her.

“Consider it as thanks for the croissant. I will serve as your guard.”

○

Prince Robert and Rosamia-san.

Both of them had one thing in common. They were both searching for the same person—Princess Chocola—who was currently walking next to me.

This is just my hunch, but one of them is a collaborator of the “scary person” that Princess Chocola mentioned. That’s why they asked me to bring her to different countries.

Which means that I might end up handing over Princess Chocola to the bad people if I make the wrong choice.

Which one should I believe? If I compare my thoughts to Princess Chocola’s frank opinion, the answer should become obvious.

“...Oh? We’re heading towards the Watermill Capital?”

“Yes. Your lover is waiting for you there.”

After thinking about it, I decided to head towards where Prince Robert was waiting.

I don’t know who ordered Rosamia-san to search for Princess Chocola, and what her intentions are. It’s possible that she was ordered to search by the scary person who was trying to forcefully marry Princess Chocola.

If I have to pick one of the two, I think it would be better to believe Prince Robert.

Even if the two countries had gone to war at one point... No, the war had already come to an end more than ten years ago and there was a fair amount of trade between the two countries, so this point doesn’t need to be taken into consideration.

I turned towards Princess Chocola, and,

“We should be there by sunset. Please treat this as going on a walk and come with me.”

“Yes...”

Princess Chocola’s expression was clouded.

“Why, though?”

“What is it?”

“Why is my lover waiting in the Watermill Capital?”

Even if you ask me that question...

“Probably because the person who wants to destroy your happiness is waiting to ambush you at the Windmill Capital?”

Besides, he’s the Prince of that country, so it’s not particularly strange that he should be waiting there.

Princess Chocola hung her head, and,

“We were so close to having our wedding celebration... At this rate, we’ll have to wait a long time until we can officially get married.”

Saying so, she started to complain.

“You don’t need to worry about that. The ceremony will go ahead as originally planned.”

“...? What ceremony?”

“Your wedding ceremony, of course.”

I replied to Princess Chocola who was tilting her head in confusion.

“You had planned to have the wedding in the Watermill Capital all along, right?”

After hearing that, Princess Chocola suddenly came to a stop.

“What are you talking about?”

She was looking at me with suspicious eyes.

It was a strange feeling—it felt like the two of us had misunderstood each other at some important point.

For now, let's go back to the start.

“Your lover is Prince Robert, correct?”

However,

“No.”

Saying so, Princess Chocola shook her head.

And then, she declared that,

“He is the scary person who is trying to destroy my happiness.”

○

It happened before I could reply to this statement that derailed the conversation that already headed down a strange direction.

No, instead of saying that it happened, saying that it came flying would be a better way of putting it.

“Nuaaaaaaaaaargh!”

A man came flying towards the two of us from the direction from the Watermill Capital, where the two of us had been headed.

He had blond hair and blue eyes. That man gave a hoarse yell and flew past us, fell on the path that we were walking on, and slowly came to a stop while scattering red leaves everywhere.

That sight almost looked like his body had been scraped by the ground and he was spraying blood everywhere.

“I wonder if he is alright?”

“...That's the scary man who is trying to destroy my happiness.”

She spoke while clutching the sleeve of my robe.

Well, it looks like his own body has been destroyed instead.

“But, just who did that...?”

It’s improbable that he had caught sight of Princess Chocola and came flying out of Watermill Capital on his own. Seeing as he came flying towards us, there must be someone who sent him flying.

Was he kicked by a horse or something?

I turned to look in the direction from where he had come flying—in the direction of the Watermill Capital.

“...Woah.”

After seeing it, I took a step back.

There was a demon standing in that direction.

“Rosamia...!”

Standing next to me, Princess Chocola whispered that name.

The Knight from the Windmill Capital, Rosamia-san, slowly came walking towards us from the direction of the Watermill Capital. It looked like she was very, very angry, as she was releasing killing intent from her entire body. She gave off an atmosphere that made me think that I’d get my head broken if I so much as touched her.

Incidentally, she was all the more intimidating because she was carrying a log.

Just seeing her approach made me feel like my head was about be crushed.

“Rosamia! Is it really you? Ah, thank goodness...”

“Eh? Ah.. Umm, Princess Chocola!”

I have no idea what is going on.

She went running straight towards Rosamia-san who was clearly oozing killing intent and looked like the personification of hostility. She ran straight towards her, disregarding my attempt to restrain her.

She looked like a lady who was finally reunited with her lover.

.....

...Hmm?

I had a bad premonition—but come on, surely not.

“Princess!”

I was still trying to make sense of what was going on, but the story continued to unfold while completely disregarding my presence. Rosamia-san stood with open arms to receive Chocola-san who was running towards her.

What happened to the log that she was carrying, you ask?

She had thrown it. With all her strength.

“Princess!”

“Rosamia!”

The two of them embraced passionately.

“Guhe.”

I heard the sound of something being crushed behind me, and also someone groaning, but I didn’t look behind me as I was scared.

“Ah, Princess... I’m so glad...”

“Rosamia...! I was so scared...”

Seriously, I don’t understand what is going on. I just want to stop thinking about it.

I asked Princess Chocola and Rosamia-san for the details, just to be on the safe side. Summarizing their incoherent rambling, it was something like this.

First, for the basic setting.

Chocola-san, who was the princess of the Windmill Capital, and her close aide and knight, Rosamia-san, were lovers. They were both female, but they were still in love with each other.

Well, love comes in many forms, so I'll let that slide for now.

In any case, the two of them were so deeply in love that no one else could ever come in between them.

Even a marriage between a princess and a knight would ordinarily give rise to protests, but in this case they were both of the same gender. When the King of the Windmill Capital—Princess Chocola's father—came to know about this, he was extremely displeased.

If his daughter was homosexual, she could not give birth to children.

So the King forcefully arranged a marriage on his own. The groom was Robert-san, who was the Prince of the neighboring Watermill Capital.

Before they knew it, the matter of Robert-san and Chocola-san's wedding was decided and both Chocola-san and Rosamia-san objected.

"Father, I have no interest in men."

"My King, I have sworn to spend the rest of my life with the Princess"

"Rosamia..."

"Princess..."

Apparently, they went on like that in front of the King. They told me that while blushing.

However, the King completely ignored both of their wishes. In fact, he had already decided the date of the marriage on his own.

“Prince Robert will come to pick you up in a few days. Go and have the wedding ceremony in the Watermill Capital.”

That’s what the King said.

I can’t help but think that the matter of Chocola-san’s marriage with Robert-san had been going on behind the scenes for quite some time. I still think that it was a political marriage arrangement.

Putting that aside, both of them panicked at the thought of her marrying Robert-san.

And so, they arrived at a decision.

“That’s right! If the two of us get married first, then we don’t have to worry about the wedding with Prince Robert!”

“Well done, Princess!”

And so, the two of them decided to have a secret wedding at a small church. The preparations for the wedding were progressing well, and Princess Chocola was shedding tears of joy at finally being able to marry the one she loved.

However, he arrived at that moment.

The scary person who wanted to destroy her happiness—Prince Robert—opened the doors of the church without waiting for permission, and took Princess Chocola away. He then put her on the sled that was attached to his horse (equipped with croissants) and set out for Watermill Capital.

Princess Chocola dealt with the situation calmly. She calmly untied the ropes that connected the sled to the horse, and made her escape. She then sat in the forest and ate croissants while waiting for her beloved to come rescue her.

All’s well that ends well.

.....

No, it didn't end well at all...

○

“Rosamia!” “Princess!” “Rosamia...” “Princess...” “Rosamia...?”
“Princess...?” “Rosamia!” “Princess!”

This exchange went on, back and forth many, many times. Can you imagine how painful it was to watch? They're just calling each other's names, so why is it so embarrassing? The sight of the two was so embarrassing that I felt like covering my eyes and ears and sitting down on the spot.

“Hey, give me a kiss.”

“We can't, Princess. People are watching.”

“Don't worry about that.”

“But...”

“Do you hate me?”

“No, of course not...”

“Then, please.”

“Princess...”

“Rosamia...”

.....

I can't bear to watch.

I quickly turned around. I did that to escape from the strange atmosphere created by those two ladies, and definitely not to look at him, but...

“Hey, it's hasn't been that long since we met.”

When I turned around, he was standing there.

He had received a direct hit from the log that Rosamia-san had thrown at him, and yet he stood there while having a cheerful smile on his face.

His clothing was ragged and blood was flowing from his head, but it was definitely him, without a doubt.

“You’re the Prince, right?”

I asked, just to make sure.

“Are you still alive?”

“Indeed, I am the Prince of the Watermill Capital. And this goes without saying, but I am still alive.”

“I thought you had received a fatal wound from having having a log thrown at you, but you are unexpectedly tough.”

“An attack of that level is nothing.”



“Just what are you...”

“I am the prince of the Watermill Capital.”

No, I wasn't asking about that... Oh, never mind. If I keep reacting to each and every little thing, it'll never end.

“By the way, what do you think after seeing this?”

I showed Prince Robert, who had tragically misunderstood this situation from the start, the scene of the two ladies passionately embracing each other.

“Ah... It makes my heart beat faster...”

“Are you sure that's not because of the blood you're losing from your head?”

“I feel like I'm about to awaken to something new...”

“Haa, it was a fatal wound, after all.”

“Well, jokes aside.”

“That was a joke?”

“...Maybe I was half serious?”

“Yep, definitely a fatal wound.”

“Do you think it'll heal?”

“It's probably too late for treatment.”

“.....”

“So, what were you saying?”

“Ah, right. After seeing them like this, I have no choice but to admit many things to myself.”

“Like what?”

Prince Robert was still smiling.

“That Knight-san said all sorts of stuff to me earlier while she was bashing me with that log. She said that I had been deceived by the King of the Windmill Capital, and that the Princess actually loved her and not me.”

“Haa.”

“I couldn’t believe her at that time, but I understand it after seeing those two now. It looks like I was just playing the part of a clown.”

“.....”

Well, yeah. I couldn’t say that to his face, though, so I elected to remain silent.

“They’re both girls... that’s kind of nice.”

The prince of a country is spouting strange things while standing next to me, but I choose to continue remaining silent.

We stood there watching Rosamia-san and Princess Chocola carry on their incomprehensible exchange for a while, and then Princess Robert finally started to talk seriously.

“I’m going to give up on marrying her.”

“Is that so? I see.”

“...Well, part of the reason is because I have no other choice.”

“.....”

That girl seems to have no interest in anyone other than Rosamia-san, after all.

“Besides, I have to return to my country and do something extremely important.”

“Oh?”

“I’m thinking of making homosexuality legal.”

“Oh, I see.”

“That’s a pretty lukewarm response.”

“I felt a little repulsed.”

“...Well, I’m sure there will be a lot of people who oppose it now. But there must be other people like those two, who love each other unfettered by gender. If I can make my country accept that, then I’m sure we will have an even greater peace than before.”

I see.

“...And what’s your real reason?”

“Girls doing it together... that’s nice.”

“.....”

When I stopped talking, I heard the voices of those two making a racket. As if only that place had turned into a flower garden.

I thought that if I decide to stop traveling at some point in the future and settle down in some country, I’m definitely not going to settle in the country that lies on the end of this path.

“Ah, that reminds me.”

I called out to Prince Robert who had started to walk away.

He turned around and gave me a cheerful (albeit bloodstained) smile.

“Yes?”

“.....”

I stretched my hand out towards him.

“Hmm? What is it?”

He apparently didn’t understand my intention, so he stood there while tilting his head in confusion.

So I gave him a smile and said,
“Please pay me my ten gold coins.”
“I found the princess, just as you asked.”
I gave that as an additional explanation.

○

When I stopped at a certain country, I happened to overhear rumours about the Windmill Capital and Watermill Capital.

I heard people saying that both countries unconditionally made homosexuality legal, and people were talking about whether that was a change for the better or not.

At the very least, it appeared that diplomatic relations between the two countries had become far better compared to how it was before.

In particular, people who had been in the closet until now became far more open because the Princess of the Windmill Capital married someone of the same gender.

Marriage between females was encouraged in the Watermill Capital, and the Prince made announcements stating that, “The country will offer financial aid to women who want to marry each other.” Due to that, there were a large number of cases where men disguised themselves as women to fake a lesbian wedding, so the Prince had a really hard time.

In this way, the countries that only had watermills and windmills made a name for themselves in a strange fashion.

The two countries apparently saw an increase in the number of visiting travelers.

However, it appears that they are seeing a decrease in population.

I wonder why that is?

Chapter 4: The Eyewitness Report

Umm...

When was it that I first met that man, again?

Where did I meet him?

My memories are vague. I'm not sure.

It just goes to show how unmemorable that place was, and I just happened to meet him there. No, we didn't really talk to each other directly, so I should probably say that our paths crossed there.

If I remember correctly, I met him on the path that linked these two random countries in the middle of nowhere. I don't remember what kind of place it was. I just remember that it was on a path.

Ah, but I entered this country by going through this gate, so I must have happened across him on the path that extends a long way outside the gate. Now that I think about it, I seem to remember walking along that path.

The time was... that's right, it was evening. Or was it morning...? It was probably morning.

I arrived at this country around noon today, and I met that man while I was on my way here, so it must have been morning.

How's that? A flawless bit of logic, if I do say so myself. What, you don't care? Ah, I see....

...? Yes, it's true. I did happen across that man on the path. Why are you still trying to confirm that fact? Even though you're the one who asked me.

I just wanted to relax and go sightseeing in this country...

The man you're asking about was certainly headed towards the country on the other side—that ordinary country with no distinguishing features.

Well, it's nice to occasionally visit an ordinary country. I liked how they didn't try to show off. It really was "just another country".

This country is not like that, though, is it?

Eh? What's with that expression?

Fumu Fumu.

Please, you must be joking. Looking at how eccentric that man's clothing was, there's no way this can be an ordinary country. I'm sure this country must have some incredible secret hidden away. It's enough to make my heart beat faster in anticipation.

Eh?

...Ah, that's right. You people are dressed ordinarily enough. Why's that?

That man is just weird? Ah, I see...

And then, the soldier in front of me spoke with a bitter expression.

"Just to confirm once again... You really met a man who matches this description? On the path outside the country?"

The man held up a sketch in front of me. The eccentric attire of the man that I happened across has been faithfully reproduced in it. That appearance is strange enough to make you want to blurt out something. What the heck is this? No, I'm serious.

What kind of man would walk around looking like this? If it was me, I would want to kill myself out of shame. This is a level of shame that would persist for all eternity.

However, the important details of the face in the drawing were black and smudged, so I couldn't tell for sure.

No matter how closely I look at it, the fact remains that I don't really remember that man's face.

The soldier looked at the paper and the part I was staring at, and said,

“...Can you remember his face?”

“No, not at all.”

In turn, I asked the soldier.

“By the way, what exactly did this man do?”

“He’s wanted for theft. He stole money from the safes of several rich men in this country.”

“A man who was dressed in such a fashion?”

“That’s right.”

“You can’t judge people by their looks after all...”

“Not his looks, but rather, his attire.”

Good point.

And then, the soldier sighed, folded the piece of paper into quarters, and put it away in his pocket.

It looks like the investigation is over. The soldier said “Thank you, Miss,” and gave me a salute. I imitated his pose and said,

“No problem. I only did what was natural—by the way, was my testimony of any use?”

Hearing that, the man once again went back to having a bitter expression.

“No... I don’t know. Knowing where the criminal is is certainly a step in the right direction, but...”

The man let the sentence trail off ambiguously.

“What’s wrong?”

He stopped saluting and said,

“We’ve heard a lot of eyewitness reports, but unfortunately, none of them remember the criminal’s face.”

“.....”

Ah, I see.

“So you mean...”

“That’s right. The only thing people remember is his eccentric attire.”

Chapter 5: The Pioneers of Fashion

As the flying broom cut through the desolate autumn atmosphere, the plants that spread across the ground with little balls of white fluff attached to them reluctantly swayed their heads.

“...Oops.”

That was close. Thinking so, the girl riding on the broom reduced her speed a little so that it would not adversely affect the cotton fields.

This girl, whose ash-grey hair was her characteristic feature, was a witch as well as a traveler. Wearing a black robe, a black tricorne, and brooch shaped like a star on her chest that was proof of her being a witch, the girl flew on her broom with an air of dignified freedom as usual.

So, who was this witch who was enjoying her luxurious freedom to the fullest?

That’s right, it’s me.

“.....”

I took a deep breath while looking at the small country that was on the other side of the cotton fields.

The hint of summer in the air felt as soft as the quivering cotton that was below me.

○

Oh my, this country certainly looks strange.

I came to that elegant conclusion a while after I arrived at that country and walked around a little. I couldn’t help but feel uneasy at this sight that I saw everywhere.

“.....”

Wherever I look, I see princes and princesses. Everyone here has an appearance that suggests that they are wealthy.

All the people walking around were either princesses who wore gorgeous dresses, or princes who wore outfits that resembled extravagant military uniforms.

Just what was going on?

“Excuse me.”

I caught hold of one of the princes who happened to walk near me, and asked him.

“I am a traveler. May I have a moment of your time?”

“Eh? Me?”

The person who appeared to be the archetype of a timid young man stopped walking while looking bewildered.

“Yes, you. Is this country currently having a costume party or something of the sort?”

“No, why do you ask?”

“Then why is everyone dressed in clothes that make them look like royalty?”

“Do they really look like royalty... This is pretty normal, if you ask me.”

“I see.”

So this kind of magnificent clothing is normal in this country? It would be good to get some opinions from other people as well.

It's time to end this conversation, then.

“I understand, thank you very much. Goodbye.”

“Ah, you're welcome.”

I parted ways from the pseudo-prince who still looked like he didn't understand what I was talking about.

I walked all the way to the center of the town, and as expected, this area was filled with royalty as well.

I saw princesses who were in the middle of doing their shopping, and princes and princesses who were having a friendly chat in cafes. Aaah, I feel like my head is spinning.

There was no opportunity to rest my eyes. When I looked upwards into the distance, I saw signboards and advertisements which had paintings of people wearing nobles' clothing hung on a building that looked like a cathedral.

The country itself had a stable atmosphere, but it felt overly opulent because of the people who lived here. I thought it would be handy to have a pair of glasses that could darken my field of vision to make it bearable. I wonder if someone could make something like that?

And then.

I was finally able to discover a reason for the state of this country after seeing the advertisements.

"Excuse me."

"Yes?"

This time, I called out to a young lady nearby who looked like a princess, and asked her.

"I am a traveler. Could you tell me if that kind of clothing is popular in this country right now?"

That young lady looked at me with a dubious expression and answered.

"Eh? Yes, that's right. It's indeed currently in fashion."

"I see..."

So that's why everyone is wearing the same kind of clothing. Looking at me who appeared to have understood something, the young lady who looked like a princess also came to an understanding on her own and nodded.

"I wondered why you were wearing something so strange, so you're not from this country after all... Fufu."

Just what kind of conclusion did she come to? Why does her laugh feel slightly condescending?

"Is there something wrong with my clothing?"

"It's certainly a little unusual."

"Don't tell me, is this the first time you've seen a robe?"

The young lady shook her head.

"No. The magicians of this country don't wear robes, though, so that's what I meant when I said it was unusual."

"They don't wear robes?"

"Yes. They wear fashionable clothes."

"....."

That doesn't give the impression of being a magician...

"Well, they do wear tricorne. To show that they are magicians."

But that wouldn't go well with the rest of their clothing...

However, just like she said, there were some people among those dressed like royalty who were wearing tricorne.

.....

They were very, very uncool-looking magicians.

As I thought, it doesn't suit them at all...

"So they go with whatever is popular...?"

“Yes. I mean, why would they want to wear something that is old-fashioned? Besides, don’t they cut a dashing figure?”

“It’s almost blinding.”

“Right?”

I wasn’t praising them, but the lady looked satisfied.

“By the way, can I ask you about something else?”

The lady seemed to be in good humor for some reason, and gave me a big nod.

That’s perfect.

“What decides whether clothing is fashionable in this country or not?”

“Hmm? I don’t know. Some fashions just become popular overnight.”

“Ahh.”

So everyone is just going with the flow? I see.

“Thank you very much. I learned something new today.”

“No problem—ah, speaking of which, you should go to that store over there if you’re interested in the latest fashions, Traveler-san.”

Saying so, the young lady who was dressed in noble clothing very kindly pointed me in the direction where I should go next.

That place was across the main street from where we were standing.

The building had many advertisements on it, and it was so large that you wouldn’t be blamed for mistaking it to be a cathedral.

○

“Welcome... Oh, my. Are you perhaps a traveler?”

When I entered the store, a lady wearing a plain suit came to greet me. She must be an employee of this store.

I'll ignore how she instantly decided that I was a traveler.

“Yes, hello. I just heard that this shop is the most popular in the country, so I came to take a look.”

“Oh, my! That's indeed true. So you came to this country from outside looking for fashionable clothes? In that case, there is some merchandise I would highly recommend—”

As soon as she confirmed that I was an outsider, the store clerk's eyes began to sparkle and she started to explain things enthusiastically. So dazzling.

By the way, does this shop sell glasses that darken the field of vision? Nope, it doesn't. I see.

“Oh, it's rare to see a traveler here.”

While I was being led around inside the store, an old lady with a bent back and walking with a cane came out of the back of the store.

“Ah, Manager.”

The shop clerk called her in that manner.

The old lady moved her feet and cane while walking towards me, and asked,

“Are you looking to buy clothes from this country?”

I shook my head.

“No, not at all. I was just curious.”

“I see. Well, I can understand why you would be curious... The clothing styles in this country keep progressing after all.”

“Yes, that's right.”

“By the way, what do you think about the clothing in this country, Traveler-san? Despite appearances, we make enough of them to export them to other countries as well.”

“Honestly speaking, I think it’s incredible. I think it’s impossible to make so many clothes like these without having a high level of skill and a lot of materials.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes.”

They have enough raw materials that even commoners can afford to buy clothes that would be fit for royalty, and their sewing techniques are also excellent. This much can be confirmed just by walking around the country. It would be impossible to progress the culture of clothing to this extent if the country was not peaceful and the people didn’t have a lot of free time.

This country must look like a treasure box to merchants who come here from other places.

“By the way, where are you from, Traveler-san?”

“From somewhere very far away.”

“How long have you been traveling?”

“For quite a long while.”

“Hoho... That’s amazing.”

The old lady looked at me with warm eyes, and,

“In that case, you must have seen different sorts of fashions in different kinds of countries. ”

She easily asked that question in a piercing manner.

I had a bad premonition.

“...No, I am not traveling to observe the differences in clothing styles, so I don’t really know much about them.”

I took a discreet step back so that the old lady wouldn’t notice.

However, the shop clerk who had been standing next to me all this time moved behind me, and held both my shoulders. I've been caught.

"Traveler-san, even if you don't know much about clothes, you've traveled all over the world and seen different styles of clothing, right? I'm so jealous..."

"....."

Oh my, things seem to be headed in a bad direction.

My escape route has been completely cut off, and the senior citizen in front of me is slowly getting closer. Yikes, this is scary.

"Would you be willing to talk to me about the things you've seen during your travels, Traveler-san?"

"Ehehe," the old lady laughed creepily with her wrinkled face.

And so, I was taken into the back room which was cluttered with prototypes of new clothes.

"...Fumu fumu. So those clothes had a design like this?"

"Well, yes. More or less."

"I see—what next? What kind of clothes did the people in the far eastern countries wear? An oriental person came to our country a few years ago and left some clothing here... Ah, here it is. Do they look like this?"

"Yes, that's right. Apparently, they are called Kimonos."

"They use considerably good fabric... It's very hard to replicate this glossy color and feel with cotton. Do you know how this is made?"

"No idea."

"Hmm... by the way, what about the neighboring countries?"

"Yes, I've visited them."

“Can you tell me whatever you remember about what kind of clothing was fashionable there?”

“I’m sorry, I don’t know. Actually, all of them were just wearing ordinary clothes...”

“Ehehe, you say some strange things, Traveler-san. There’s no such thing as ‘ordinary clothes’ in this world. As far as clothes are concerned, nothing is ordinary. There are as many variations as there are people.”

“Isn’t that something unique to your own country...?”

“Hmm?”

“Actually, if you use that logic, the people in this country have no individuality—”

“HmMMM?”

“No, it’s nothing. I’m sorry.”

“So out of all these prototypes... which one do you think is good?”

“I like the one in the middle.”

“That’s the dress I’m wearing right now?”

“Oh, you’re asking about the clothes you’re holding up? I like the one on the right.”

“I see, I see. Right then, moving on—”

In that manner, they kept me talking about all sorts of things.

As they forced me to extract knowledge from the corners of my brain that I usually don’t think about, I became extremely tired. I feel like my head is about to break.

After that, the days went by with me talking about everything I knew.

It's probably time to head to the next country—Five days had already passed when I thought about this while looking at the sunrise.

I brushed my teeth, finished my breakfast, and prepared to leave the country.

I climbed down the stairs to the reception desk in the inn and handed over my key. Just before I left, the lady at the desk said to me,

“Oh my, that's a fancy outfit you have on, Miss. Just what I would expect from a traveler.”

Like that, she said something strange to me.

Up through yesterday, people who passed by me all sneered at me while making fun of my clothes.

○

The doubt I had on my mind as I left the inn was soon cleared up.

I walked back on the same path that I had taken to reach the inn yesterday, and when I reached the main street near which that clothing store was located, I saw that there were a few versions of me mixed in along with the usual people who were dressed like nobility.

They were people who wore clothing that looked exactly like mine.

When I looked upwards, the signs and advertisements on the store had changed as well. There were pictures of a girl who looked a lot like me, wearing a robe just like mine, with captions that said, “This is the newest trend!”

.....

“So that Traveler-san I saw before was even more advanced than us...”

There was a young lady who was feeling regretful in that manner for some reason.

There were men looking up at the signboards while saying, “That's cute.”

“You know, those clothes do look more functional....!”

Saying that, some people rushed towards the store.

“I did it! I managed to buy the new clothes that just went on sale!”

Some people came out the store in high spirits while wearing robes.

Basically, there were a lot of such people.

I think it’s a good thing that there are fewer people wearing clothes that are so dazzling, but wearing clothes similar to mine... I feel like covering my eyes.

Actually, what on earth is going on? I don’t understand what this means.

“Ehehe.”

Before I noticed it, the cane-holding old lady was standing next to me while looking at her successful store with gentle eyes.

“Oh, hello. Is it okay for you to leave the store?”

“It’s fine. I worked really hard for the last few hours, so I want to take a break in the morning at least.”

“Ha, thank you for your hard work..”

Okay, that’s enough praise. Time to move to the main topic.

“So, how did this happen?”

“What are you talking about?”

“This latest fad, it’s clearly the same as what I’m wearing.”

“Oh, you’re just imagining things. Ehehe.”

She dodged the issue.

.....

“Well, half of it is chance, and the other half is just because I wanted to. I had been planning to make similar clothes from the start... but your clothes were so good that I decided to make the design closer to them.”

“...Are you going to pay me my fee for the design of the clothes?”

“Can you prove that you were the designer of these clothes... Well, I apologize for putting you on the signboards without permission. I’ll give you this as an apology.”

Saying so, the old lady held out something that sparkled over my fingers. Something flat and shiny started to fall onto my outstretched hands.

It was gold.

“Actually, it’s an honor to be displayed on the signboards.”

“Right?”

I nodded to her after putting the gold away safely in my purse.

“Still, it’s amazing how you made that many clothes in just a few days.”

“That’s because there are quite a few magicians in our country.”

I see.

It was easy to imagine the sight of magicians using magic to mass-produce clothes, or control paint using magic to create whatever image they wanted.

Those magicians are now wearing clothes similar to mine, right... It’s a little creepy.

“Still, this is quite strange.”

The old lady said while looking at the ruckus outside the shop.

In her warm gaze, I saw a hint of sadness.

“I wanted to make this country the best when it comes to the culture of clothing, but every time I create and sell a new style of clothes, I feel like

someone has attached heavy fetters to my legs. Although it is supposed to be more advanced than the clothing in any other country, I feel like it's lagging behind every other country."

"....."

"Well, it's obvious where we went wrong."

When it comes to clothing, you should just wear whatever you want. I am fond of the clothes my mother handed down to me, so I wear them often.

If what the old lady said was true, and there are as many different variations of clothing as there are people, then perhaps the style of clothing someone chooses to wear reflects their own personality. Even if other people find it strange and laugh, it can't be helped because the clothes reflect who the person truly is.

Maybe this was what the old lady had been trying to say all along.

The people of this country only wore the latest styles, and this was precisely the reason why the old lady was so worried.

That was equivalent to saying that the people had no individuality at all.

It's a truly sorrowful state of affairs.

"Do you think I should change my methods, Traveler-san?"

"What do you think is more important, Obaa-san? This country's culture of clothing or the individuality of the people living here?"

"The culture, of course."

"Then you probably shouldn't change anything."

"You're right. Ehehe."

Saying that, the old lady turned to me and laughed.

Now then, I wonder how long this latest fad will last in this country? Unfortunately, I won't be around to see it by the time it changes.

However, I'm sure some other traveler will arrive here at some point and serve as the inspiration for rewriting the culture in this country again.

Going from one fad to the next.

Unexpectedly, it feels like this country has been doing this since many years in order to ensure that their culture doesn't die out.

Chapter 6: Until the snow melts

It was a cold winter day.

Many people were walking through the alleyways while the snow was falling incessantly. Among them, one girl wore a seedy hood and walked while hanging her head.

“...It’s cold.”

The girl’s name was Erize. She looked lovely, with her long, golden hair and skin that was as fair as snow.

She was twelve years old. Still a child.

“.....”

After walking for a while, the girl reached the baker’s shop.

The interior of the shop was quiet, and the only people there were the middle-aged male shopkeeper who was reading a newspaper and a young witch who looked at the rows of bread with a happy expression.

Erize hurriedly picked up a loaf of bread, promptly took it to the counter, and took out some money.

“Oji-san, I’d like to buy this.”

The shopkeeper glanced at the money while folding his newspaper, and then looked at Erize with an irritated expression.

“You’re here again? ...Sorry, but I’m not selling anything to you. Go away.”

“Why? I have money, don’t I? Please sell me some bread. I want my younger sister to eat something nice.”

“Who knows where you stole this money from? I can’t accept it.”

The shopkeeper put his hand on the money that Erize had placed on the counter, and pushed it back towards her.

“...Please sell me some bread.”

“Didn’t you hear me the first time? I’m not going to sell anything to a monster like you.”

“.....”

In the end, the girl left the shop without buying anything.

“.....?”

The young witch in the store looked at that exchange of words with a mystified expression.

After being rejected by the baker, Erize eventually reached a small roadside stall.

“.....”

That stall did not have an attendant. There was no shopkeeper, instead there was only a box to put money in. The words “One copper coin per apple. Please put in the corresponding amount depending on how many you want to buy,” were written on the box.

As no store was willing to sell her food, Erize had only been eating these apples lately.

...Even though she wanted to give her younger sister something other than apples once in a while.

While thinking that, Erize put the apples in her bag and put the appropriate number of coins into the box.

However.

“Hey, you. What do you think you’re doing?”

She heard that voice, and then someone grabbed her hand.

She looked up with a startled expression, and saw a man with a scary expression standing there.

“I put this box here for humans to use. Not for something like you—now, return those apples.”

“But I already put in the money...”

“That doesn’t matter. I don’t want to sell anything to you.”

“.....”

“Now, give those back, you monster.”

Saying that, the man gripped her arm tighter.

At this rate, she would have no food left. They would not be able to make it through winter. Her younger sister might die. After such fears accumulated in her mind in a moment of silence, Erize resorted to wild tactics.

She bit down as hard as she could on the man’s hand.

“Ouch! What the hell are you doing, you brat!?”

The man loosened his grip for a second and, taking that chance, Erize shook off his hand and ran off while carrying the apples.

After running for a while, the girl looked around restlessly as she reached her own house.

More than half the roof had fallen in due to a fire, and even the portion of the house that barely had a roof didn’t have a floor. The walls also had large holes in them, and it didn’t look like it would be able to keep the elements out at all.

The girl called this place home.

“.....”

In front of the house.

There was a small parcel in front of the house that was just the right size to hold with the palms of both her hands. Every morning, afternoon, and night, a similar parcel would always be left in front of her house.

Maybe the parcel contained something different this time—the girl picked up the parcel while looking a little hopeful.

After opening it,

“Ugh! How horrible!”

Erize immediately threw it away. The parcel that she had thrown away hit the wall of the neighboring house and expelled its contents onto the snow, namely, the dead body of a rat and several immobile insects.

A brown coloured liquid slowly seeped into the snow.

“...Oh no. After all the trouble he took to make it.”

“Such a waste.”

“That’s so rude.”

The girl could see her neighbors who were saying such things while looking at what she had done.

After glaring at them, Erize disappeared into her own house.

“Welcome back, Onee-chan.”

Erize heard that voice come from a corner of the house.

Walking a little deeper into the house, she saw a young girl who was huddled up in a futon that was made by patching different types of fabric together.

She looked exactly like Erize, with her golden hair and skin as white as snow. She was Erize’s little sister, younger by two years. Her name was Millina.

“I’m back, Millina—here, I have something for you.”

Erize went up to her sister and snuggled into the futon beside her, then took out a bright green apple from the paper bag and gave it to her.

“Wow! That’s amazing. Where did you get it?”

“I bought it because I wanted you to get better quickly, Millina. Eat as much as you want, okay?”

“Yes! Thank you!”

After seeing her little sister biting into the apple with a smile on her face, Erize’s expression lightened as well.

“How do you feel?”

“I got better after eating the apple!”

“Really? That’s great.”

Erize felt something prick her heart when she remembered how her hand had been grabbed at the roadside stall.

“....I’m sorry it’s always like this.”

“Why are you sorry?”

“It’s always the same thing, you must be bored of it, right?”

“Hmm...? But I like apples. I don’t mind eating them everyday!”

“...I see. That’s great.”

Saying that, Erize put her hand into the bag and took out the apple that was her share.

Once they finished eating these, then they would truly be out of food this time. The thing she had been relying on until now could no longer be used.

While being depressed about the dark future that awaited them, Erize bit into the apple and took off her hood.

There was no need to hide what was growing on her head while she was inside her house.

“...Haa.”

After removing the hood that was a little too tight for her, two curved, sheep-like horns were revealed.

She was a therianthrope that looked similar to a human.

Sadly, the apples that she had bought only lasted them a day. The day after they had run out of food, Erize gently got out of the futon so as to not wake Millina, and went to the main street—to the apple vendor's stand.

After confirming that the stall owner was not nearby, Erize picked up a few apples and put them in her bag. After her bag was full, she took out some money and was about to put it into the box, but,

“...It should be fine even if I don't put any money inside, right?”

She didn't put the money in in the box.

Whether she put the money in the box or not, the result would be the same. In that case, she could steal as many as she liked. She was definitely not doing anything wrong. She was not at fault.

While making many excuses to herself, she tried to move away from the stall.

That's when it happened.

A hand lightly fell on Erize's shoulder.

Startled, she looked around and saw that a witch was standing there.

“That's wrong. You need to properly pay for what you take.”

It was the young witch she had seen the day before yesterday in the baker's shop.

Throwing a few silver coins into the box, the witch spoke.

“How about we talk for a bit?”

Her ash-grey hair swayed lightly, and she gave a gentle smile.

I arrived at this country while continuing to travel aimlessly, and received a summons from the magistrate in charge of the city on my first day here, right after I purchased some bread at the bakery.

I was often called upon to resolve problems in a country because I had the rank of a witch.

“Please take a seat, Elaina-sama.”

After being guided to the reception room, I returned the greeting and sat down on one of the sofas that had been arranged around a table.

“So, what is your request? Ah, would you like some bread?”

“No, thank you.”

“Is that so... Would you mind if I listened to you while eating?”

“...Go ahead.”

“Thank you.”

I took out a roll of bread from the bag that I had just purchased at the baker’s shop, and started to eat it.

The magistrate started to speak after giving a tired sigh.

“This country is currently burdened with a certain problem... we would like for you to solve that problem for us.”

“Fumu fumu.”

I nodded while chewing.

“.....”

The magistrate made a complicated expression and continued to speak.

“We would like to hire you to solve the issue regarding this therianthrope.”

Saying so, he passed a drawing to me. It was a strange drawing of a person... or at least, it looked like a human. The most distinctive part of her

appearance was the two horns that were growing on her head. They were curved horns similar to what you would find on a sheep.

“This therianthrope is currently living in our country, but there is a problem regarding this... Simply put, there is a rift between her and the citizens of the country. Hence, I would like to request that you temporarily take this therianthrope out of the country—”

And so, he explained the whole story behind the request to me.

It was a story of a horrible country, horrible people, and a pitiful little girl.

“.....”

After hearing the whole story, I wonder what kind of expression I had on my face?

It was probably not a very good expression. In fact, I was despising them. I was even angry.

“...So you want me to kick her out of the country for a reason like that?”

After hearing my words, he clenched his fist tightly and slowly nodded.

“Even I feel bad about it... but I don’t see any other option after things have gotten to such a bad state.”

And then, with a dark and bitter expression, he asked me,

“Please, can you do something to save her...?”

I didn’t want to decide on whether to accept the request or not based only on what I had heard from the magistrate. So I decided to take one full day to see the state of affairs for myself.

I took the map that the magistrate gave me and went to the place that was marked on it—where the therianthrope currently lived. Over there, I found a dilapidated house where more than half of the house was in ruin.

“...Oh?”

After seeing the little girl who lived inside, I was very surprised. It was the little girl I had seen in the bakery yesterday.

“.....”

After seeing that, I decided to accept the job.

I did not meet with the therianthrope girl directly that day. I decided to do a little research before taking that step. I walked around and asked the baker I visited the other day, the owner of the roadside stall, people in the neighborhood, and other citizens who were walking in the street about the therianthrope child.

Every one of them told me pretty much exactly the same thing.

The next day.

I was staked out in the vicinity of the dilapidated house since early morning, when I saw that girl come out of the house.

She was headed towards a roadside stall that was on the main street. It looked like that stall was not manned, and instead it had a box for people to leave money in.

Over there, the girl was doing something bad.

That's why I immediately went over to stop her.

I lightly laid a hand on her shoulder and said,

“That's wrong. You need to properly pay for what you take.”

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I took the girl with me and went to a restaurant that was on a street corner. There were not many people inside, partly because it was so early in the morning.

We sat facing each other at a table near the window.

“.....”

“Ah, don’t worry. It’s my treat.”

I said that to the girl who was hanging her head despite the many delicious dishes placed on the table in front of her, but she still had a depressed expression.

Maybe she’s tense? Or maybe she’s feeling conscious about the dirty looks she’s getting from the people inside the store?

“What’s your name?”

“...Erize.”

“Ah, so you’re Erize-san. My name is Elaina. I am a traveling witch.”

“.....”

“So, what exactly were you trying to do earlier?”

When I said that, the girl made a startled expression, pulled the hood deeper around her face, and hung her head even lower.

“...Umm, please don’t tell anyone about what I did earlier.”

“I didn’t ask you that to blackmail you. I asked you because I’m simply curious. If I’m not wrong, we saw each other at the baker’s store the day before yesterday, right? You were acting strangely that day as well, so I became curious.”

“.....”

“That’s why I’m asking, would you be willing to tell me more about yourself?”

After I asked that, Erize-san talked to me properly for the first time.

“...You’ll probably feel disgusted after hearing me talk about myself.”

“Is that because you have horns growing on your head?”

“Yes.”

“Actually, I caught a glimpse of them through the gap in your hood earlier. They’re curved like a sheep’s horns and rather cute.”

Startled, Erize-san looked at the window that was beside her. That window that was displaying a peaceful sight of the city outside, and was also reflecting the figure of the girl. A brown coloured horn was visible through a gap in her hood.

“I am a traveler. I have seen many different types of people so far. I won’t be prejudiced or discriminate for no reason. I won’t feel disgusted even if I see a person like you.”

Actually, I thought she was kind of cute.

After hearing that, she finally turned around and looked at me.

And then, she started speaking as if she was resigned to her fate.

“Umm, I would appreciate it if you didn’t tell anyone about this either...”

She prefixed her tale with that sentence.

Apparently, Erize-san used to live peacefully with her family on a mountain some distance away from human settlements.

Her parents would hunt animals with a bow and clean the carcass, and she would cook the meat along with her sickly little sister. They were used to passing days in such a peaceful manner.

However, something happened one day about one month ago.

“When we get back, I’ll teach you how to use the bow.”

Saying that, her father went out to hunt with their mother as usual.

While waiting with her little sister for them to return, Erize-san was in high spirits about finally being able to come into her own.

However, their parents didn’t come back no matter how long they waited.

Were they having trouble finding game to hunt? The two of them waited many, many hours while wondering if that was the case, but their parents still didn't come back.

The next day.

Some unknown people came to their house while riding in a large horse-drawn carriage. One of them introduced himself as the magistrate in charge of this country. The other three were merchants.

The people who had arrived all of a sudden unloaded two large bags from the carriage and conveyed the sad truth to the girls. Erize-san's parents had died after falling off a cliff while they were hunting. The merchants from his country had discovered their bodies while they were traveling through the mountains.

The magistrate spoke to them after opening the bags and showing them the battered bodies of their parents.

The two of them cried. They clung to the bodies of their parents and cried loudly. However, their parents' bodies had gone cold a long time ago.

The magistrate of the country made a certain offer to the girls who had lost their means of support.

"We can't just leave you two alone out here. I would like for you two to come to our country and take refuge there."

After that, the magistrate had the merchants who found the bodies dig graves for them and took the hands of the two girls who were still in a daze.

The two of them were taken away to a different place before they were even able to come to grips with what had happened.

After arriving at this country, a house was prepared for the two of them to live in.

“I’ll leave food for you in front of the house everyday, so you can eat that. Also, this is for your living expenses.”

The magistrate gave Erize-san some food and enough money to live for a few days and told her,

“I’ll bring you more money at regular intervals. Feel free to use it as you wish. If you run out of money, let me know at once.”

Until the two of you recover, the country will look after your needs—he also said that.

The country accepted the two girls as citizens.

“—But apparently, the people living in this country thought differently.”

Erize-san said that after letting out a breath.

“Right after we started living in this country, the house that was prepared for us was set on fire.”

“.....”

I remembered the condition of the place where the girl was currently living.

It was a wreck, and more than half of the house was destroyed.

“The people of this country kept harassing us as if it was the natural thing to do, even after they burned down the house. They treated us as monsters every time they saw us, refused to sell us anything even though we had money, and they even ruined the money and food that the magistrate brought for us.”

“.....”

“That’s why, we lived until the day before yesterday eating apples from the unmanned roadside stall, but...”

Even that option was no longer available. I see.

“...I understand the situation.”

Basically,

“At this rate, there’s a high chance that you will die of starvation at some time in the near future?”

“...Yes. Well, that’s basically how it is.”

“Hmm, I see. I pretty much understand what’s going on.”

I said that after nodding several times.

“By the way, I have a request for you. Would you be willing to hear it?”

“What is it?”

“If you’re willing to listen to my request, then you can go ahead and eat this food. You can also take it back home, if you wish.”

“But you said that it was your treat earlier...”

“Ah, I take that back.”

“.....”

“What do you say?”

“...What is your request?”

The girl stared at me while being on her guard.

After intentionally giving a long pause, I looked straight at her and asked for one single thing.

“Allow me to save you.”

Perhaps that was the last thing she expected to hear. Erize-san stared blankly back at me.

While waiting for the girl to answer, I touched my knife and fork.

The food that had been prepared for us had gone cold because of our long discussion.

In the current situation, the girl had no viable choices.

As they were not allowed to use money, could not obtain the things they needed, and could not rely on anyone within the country, her only option was to go along with someone from outside the country like me.

Surely the girl wasn't idealistic enough to do nothing and let such a chance slip by.

“.....If I reject that request, what will you do?”

“I tell everyone in the country about what you were trying to do at the roadside stall.”

“...That's unfair. You said you weren't trying to blackmail me earlier.”

“Ah, well, I take that back too.”

“.....”

“So, what will it be? Are you willing to accept my request?”

“...Is it really okay to do that? I have nothing to give you in return, Elaina-san.”

“It's fine. I have a lot of free time. Besides—”

“.....?”

“I'm not cold enough to leave things as they are after hearing something like that.”

And so, I ended up agreeing to help Erize-san.

However, taking action right away seems like a chore... I mean, I needed time to prepare, so we parted ways for that day.

And then, next morning.

We met up at the gate leading out of the country.

“.....It’s cold!”

After waiting for about ten minutes like that while carrying some items and stamping my feet to stay warm, she slowly trotted out of the gate wearing the same clothes as yesterday.

“Sorry, I’m late... wait, what is that?”

Erize-san’s gaze was drawn to the thing I held in my hands.

“Ah, this? It’s a bow and arrows.”

I gave an additional explanation while playing with the string of the bow by pulling it and making it hum.

“Erize-san, I think it’s time for you to learn how to use the bow and arrow.”

“Why?”

“If you are able to hunt your own food, then you won’t need to rely on the people in the country, right?”

For that reason, I had spent the previous day preparing the bow and arrow, and gathering other items that they might need in the future.

“Witch-san, you know how to use a bow and arrow?”

“I’m good enough to pierce through an apple that has been set on top of a person’s head.^[1]”

“Ehh, why would anyone do that...?”

“I’m an expert who is good enough to reluctantly shoot through a fan atop a swaying ship after being told “Entertain us by shooting through this fan.”^[2]”

“Like I said, why would anyone do that...”

I took the hand of the girl who looked doubtful and led her into the forest that had been covered in white snow.

There was an archery range that gave off the impression of being handmade waiting for us inside the forest that had many tall trees. The surfaces of several trees had been scraped flat, and a round target had been carved into them. A little distance away from the targets, there was a sign that read “Please aim at the targets from here (If you hit the center, you win a prize).” It’s in my handwriting, by the way.

“You probably won’t hit anything if you start with shooting at animals right away, so let’s spend some time here honing your skill.”

That was a place I secretly prepared yesterday.

“What’s the prize?”

“Fufufu. That’s a surprise for when you manage to hit the target.”

After that, I stood next to Erize-san and showed her how to take a proper stance, and gave her hints on how to hit the target.

“To begin with, go ahead and take a shot.”

“Yes.... Ei.”

And so, the girl fired off an arrow... Or so she thought, but the arrow just fell to the ground.

“.....Did you perhaps think that the targets are buried under the snow?”

“.....”

The days of training started off in such a fashion.

Everyday, we would go to the forest outside the country where Erize-san would shoot arrows until noon, after which we would return to the country while shivering and have lunch at the restaurant. Once we were full, we would go back to the forest and resume practice.

Although she was bad at it in the beginning, it didn’t take long for Erize-san to be able to hit the targets. Actually, she was shooting arrows with a

beautiful form in just three days. The pace of her improvement was astounding. No, maybe my instruction was just that good? Perhaps I'm suited to being a teacher?

"Ah, I did it! Look, Elaina-san, I hit the center!"

Five days after we started training, I heard Erize-san shouting in joy after her arrow hit the target with a satisfying "thunk".

"So, what are you going to give me as a reward?"

Erize-san smiled after running over to me and asked that in an excited voice.

I told her after purposely dragging out the suspense for a bit.

"I'll buy you clothes that you like, as many as you want. That is your reward."

I thought she would be happy, but instead she made a complicated expression.

"...You mean, just my share?"

"What do you mean?"

"Umm... I'd like to get some for my little sister as well..."

"....."

I gently patted Erize-san's head.

"It's okay, I'll buy any amount of whatever you want."

"Yay!"

As I felt the stiff cloth and the horns underneath, the girl looked at me and smiled.

○

After obtaining new clothes, the girl's training advanced to the next level.

In the snow-covered forest, there was a set of cute footprints meandering around the trees. At the end of the trail, there was a single, pure white rabbit which was hopping while blending in with the snow, headed somewhere while twitching its nose and ears.

This time, she was not aiming at a stationary archery target, but at a living animal.

“Is there another reward if I hit it?”

“If you manage to hit it, I’ll let you eat my cooking.”

“.....Is that more delicious than the restaurant that we always go to?”

“It’s rude to compare an amateur to a professional.”

“.....I would like something else as a reward.”

“You’re too damn honest, Erize-san.”

“Ehh...”

“By the way, the rabbit will get away if you keep talking about unnecessary things.”

Erize-san took up her stance and looked at the rabbit with a narrow gaze. After that, she let out a single white breath and let the arrow fly.

The arrow flew straight into the snow and buried itself inside.

“.....Did you perhaps think that the rabbit was hibernating underneath the snow?”

After that, we continued our daily schedule of going back and forth between the outside and the restaurant in the country.

“—Ah, I ordered too much food again today. It’s my mistake. Here, Erize-san, take this as a souvenir and eat it at home”

At the restaurant, I gave Erize-san the leftover food as usual.

“Thanks for always doing this, Elaina-san.”

Erize-san gave me a faint smile while carefully accepting the parcel with both hands.

When I first met her, she always had a depressed expression on her face, but before I realized it, she became capable of giving me a warm smile with a gentle expression—or so it looked.

Was it just my imagination? Was I being conceited?

Despite my misgivings, I felt that I was helping to progress the story in a good direction, one step at a time.

At this rate, I might be able to complete the job given to me in my own way.

On the afternoon of the day that I thought that, the girl managed to bring down a rabbit successfully.

It had stopped snowing, and it was a bright, sunny day.

“Look, Elaina-san! I did it! I actually did it!”

A small rabbit lay on its side on top of the snow that was glittering from the light of the sun. A red stain spread on the snow as the rabbit’s legs convulsed as if trying to escape from the arrow that had pierced its neck.

“You finally did it. It looks delicious.”

I lifted the arrow without waiting for the rabbit’s life to cease. A limp rabbit came up with the arrow, along with a corresponding sense of weight.

“...By the way, the reward you were talking about, Elaina-san...”

“Yes, my handmade cooking.”

“Are you going to cook this?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Do you know how to prepare the meat?”

“Despite how I look, I’m an expert when it comes to preparing rabbit meat. I’m so good at it that it makes the rabbits tremble.”

“...But rabbits are always trembling, aren’t they?”

“Also, I have a suggestion, although it’s not part of the reward.”

“Hmm? What is it?”

I placed the unmoving rabbit on top of some clear snow that was not stained with blood. The snow crumbled and made way to accommodate the body of the rabbit.

“There was a house you lived in before coming here, right? Would you like to live there once again?”

“Go back home? But—”

“You have become capable of hunting by yourself. There is no reason for you to force yourself to live in that country anymore. So, what do you say? Would you like to return to the house that you used to live in along with your parents?”

“.....”

The girl stayed silent.

“Of course, I won’t force you to go if you don’t want to.”

I waited while looking forward to her reply.

A silence came upon the forest, and after a little while,

“You’re... right. Yes. I want to go. It might be okay to leave that country now.”

I felt relieved after hearing her words.

With this, she would finally be safe—or so I convinced myself.

We returned to the country after draining the blood from the rabbit on the spot and tying it with string.

It was just before noon by the time we got back to the country, and there were a lot of people on the main street. Every time we passed by someone, they looked at us as if they were looking at something strange, and every time that happened, Erize-san's head would droop even further.

"You don't need to worry about it anymore."

When I said that and touched her shoulder, she gave me a powerless smile.

It appeared that Erize-san was fairly happy about being able to leave this country—and the half-destroyed place that served as her home—as she ran into the house to bring out her luggage as soon as we reached there.

The country magistrate who had given me the job appeared over there at the same time.

"...Elaina-sama. How is the job going?"

He gave me a short bow while holding a small parcel in his hand.

"It's going well. I think everything will be settled soon just the way you wanted it."

"...I see. That's good."

"You don't look particularly happy after hearing that, though."

"It might have been what we wanted, but that doesn't mean it's necessarily the best possible outcome."

"....."

After staying silent for a moment, I said to him,

"I think that I have done my best for her, in my own way. The girl has already reached a level where you won't need to leave that parcel for her anymore."

Even from where I was standing, I could see the magistrate's fingers tighten around the parcel.

"...Thank you very much. My apologies for getting you involved in our mess."

He bowed very low to me, and then turned his back.

"I know this is impertinent, but I have just one other request for you, Elaina-sama."

"Depending on the contents, I may increase my fee amount, is that okay?"

He did not reply to my words.

"If there is an opportunity, I would like to convey our true feelings to her someday."

After saying just that, he walked away.

I did not reply to his words.

That is because I did not know if I would be able to grant his request.

"....."

A while after he left, Erize-san came back. Carrying a lot of luggage in both her hands.

"Sorry to keep you waiting. It took a while to wake my little sister up."

She was carrying her little sister on her back.

"I haven't introduced her to you yet, right? Elaina-san, this is my little sister, Millina."

It looked like the time when I had to convey their true feelings to this girl was steadily approaching.

It was approaching at a slow pace, but definitely getting closer.

“I’m home.”

After reaching that place and lightly knocking off the snow which was sticking to her shoes outside the door, Erize-san just said those two words. She walked into the house while carrying Millina-san.

“.....”

Following her example, I also knocked the snow off my shoes and went inside. There was a set of damp footsteps leading all the way to the dining room.

In front of the kitchen, there was a table with four chairs set on two opposite sides. It must have been used by all four members of her family at one point. Only one of those chairs was currently drawn.

Her little sister had been made to sit on that chair.

“Elaina-san, what are you going to make using that rabbit?”

Erize-san was looking at my hands as she spoke.

“...How about a cream stew?”

“Yay! That’s Millina’s favourite!”

Erize-san hugged her sister’s shoulders from behind and expressed her joy.

There was no reply.

“...Yeah! I can’t wait!”

She nodded to her little sister with a happy look on her face.

“.....”

I then said to her,

“I’ll make it now, so wait here, Erize-san.”

“Yes, I’ll be waiting here with my little sister.”

Erize-san sat next to her little sister while having a big smile on her face.

“...Okay.”

My voice echoed fruitlessly.

As I was cooking, her cheerful voice reached my ears.

“Hey, it’s kind of nostalgic, isn’t it?”

“From now on, I’ll take care of the work that Dad and Mom used to do. Ah, but I have to cook as well, so I’ll have more work than they did.”

“Yeah, it’s fine. I’m sure I’ll be able to do it well.”

It was the same even while we were on the way here. It was also terrible to see how Erize-san acted while she was carrying her sister and leaving the country.

She had a happy expression on her face while listening to her little sister’s voice that I could not hear.

“.....”

A delicious smell wafted from the pot in which the stew was simmering.

I was finally able to take a deep breath in the middle of this choking atmosphere. After taking a deep breath, I stirred the contents of the pot.

The smell of carrots, potatoes, and rabbit meat that were mixed with the white cream wafted out from within.

“.....”

It looked like all the things I had done after coming to this country were meaningless.

I agreed to the magistrate’s request, and got her out of that terrible country. I made a plan that would give her back her freedom, and at the same time, I prepared an environment where she could learn to hunt so that she could live by herself. I made it so that she would be able to return to this house. After

doing so much—getting her out of the country and away from other people—I had hoped that she would regain her sanity.

It was useless, after all.

It looks like I was just naively wishing for that to happen.

The tragic circumstances surrounding that girl could not be erased by something of that level.

I turned around from where I was standing in the kitchen, and looked at her. Erize-san, who had been smiling at her little sister, noticed my gaze.

“Ah, Elaina-san. Is it done already?”

“It just needs to simmer for a while.”

“Oh, so it’ll be done soon!”

“.....”

“What’s wrong?”

“...No, it’s nothing.”

“.....?”

“Hey, something about you seems weird, Elaina-san. You didn’t talk much on our way here, and even after getting here, you’ve barely said a word or two.”

“.....”

“You haven’t said anything to my little sister either.... Really, something is strange. It feels weird.”

“...You think I’m being strange?”

“Yes.”

“.....”

When I continued to stay silent,

“ —You’re really being strange.”

Erize-san nodded at the voice that I could not hear.

After that, she left me alone and returned to talking happily with her little sister.

“—Maybe she’s not feeling well?”

“—Ahaha. That’s true. Maybe she’ll feel better after eating the stew.”

“—Right? I should cook something next time to thank her.”

She kept looking at her little sister, with a happy expression on her face.

“.....”

It was a scene that I could no longer endure.

“...Erize-san.”

“Hmm? What is it?”

I winced a little as she mercilessly turned that bright smile towards me. It appears I started to become scared of her smile at some point.

I looked away from her, and,

“...Erize-san, please stop doing that.”

And then, I said it to her.

I just described what I was seeing to her.

“Your little sister is dead.”

She had been made to sit on one of the four chairs around the table.

It was a girl wearing a long coat similar to the one Erize-san was wearing, and I was able to catch a glimpse of beautiful, golden hair peeking out from the gap in her hood.

It was a corpse that was giving off such a bad smell, it was all I could do to keep from gagging.

○

“It happened one month ago. Some merchants from my country banded together and did something very wrong.”

“Fumu.”

What I had heard while sitting opposite to the magistrate that day was a horrible, tragic tale.

“There was a family of therianthropes living together quite close to our country—and these merchants decided to capture and sell them. They said that they did it because they were in desperate need of money.

The merchants first tried to capture the parents who were out hunting. They approached the pair, lying about being lost, and tried to capture them when they let down their guard.

Of course, the couple did not let themselves get captured so easily. The two of them fought back strongly even though they had been surrounded by the merchants. As the fight broke out on a mountain slope with bad footing, the couple and some of the merchants unfortunately slipped and fell down the mountain.

The remaining merchants climbed down to check on their condition, but all of them had died. The therianthrope couple had done nothing wrong, yet they lost their lives here due to the plot of the bad merchants.

This is the main cause behind the sorry situation we are currently in.

Of the band of merchants, three of them were still alive. They brought the corpses back to the country and explained the situation to me.

Regrettably, they lied. They said that, “Three merchants and two therianthropes who lived in the vicinity died due to an accident.”

I believed their words, and seeing as how the therianthropes were a married couple, I wondered if they had any children. Perhaps those children were still waiting for their parents to come back—thinking that, I took those merchants with me and returned to the mountains. After some searching, we found their house.”

The things he said after that matched what I heard from Erize-san for the most part. The magistrate told Erize-san and her sister that their parents had passed away in an accident, and then brought them back to the country.

However, there was a definite difference in what I heard from Erize-san and what the magistrate told me from this point onwards.

“A few days after the girls started to live in our country, there was an accident.”

And so, he told me what had really happened.

“The surviving merchants attempted to go after the girls this time in order to sell them and make money. One night, they snuck into the house where the girls were living, equipped with torches and knives.

The three merchants first came across the older sister. She—Erize, just like her parents, did not back down even though she was surrounded by the adults. She struggled mightily.

However, she is still only a child. The difference in stature and strength was too large. She was quickly overwhelmed by the merchants.

And so, the merchants began to take their revenge. The men dropped their knives and beat her. Kicked her. Even after she cowered in fear and begged them to stop while crying, they continued to hurt her. They probably planned to hurt her at the level where she wouldn’t die, and then capture her afterward.

It was then that one of the men was stabbed in the back by the knife that he had dropped.

Turning around, he saw a girl who looked a little younger than Erize. The younger sister, Millina, had tried to save her older sister who was being one-sidedly beaten up by the men.

The man shouted a wordless scream of rage and, releasing the older sister, he hit the younger sister with the torch that he was carrying in his hand. After that, he threw away the torch and picked up another knife that had fallen on the ground. He then advanced upon Millina who was holding her face and moaning in pain, and stabbed her over and over until she died.

He had gone too far. That was the thought that went through the minds of the other two men, and so they tried to stop him. However, before they could take action, the man who was straddling the little sister ceased to move.

Picking up the third knife that was lying on the ground, Erize had killed him. As Erize continued to stand there in a dazed manner, the fire from the discarded torch had begun to spread and the house was being consumed by flickering flames that kept getting larger.

The two merchants who were still alive panicked and ran away from there.

By the time I reached the house after hearing about it from the neighboring residents, the fire had already spread to the outside of the house. We immediately went to work and put the fire out, but more than half the house had already been destroyed.

The cause of the fire was quickly ascertained. There were three knives at the scene, the burned corpse of one of the merchants, and eyewitness accounts from neighboring residents. Based on their testimonies, I came to the conclusion that the merchants were behind this, and had the two of them captured.

After interrogating them, they finally told us the truth. However, knowing the truth didn't change the fact that it was too late to do anything about it.

Ever since the day the fire broke out, Erize was changed.

She refuses to let go of her little sister's corpse. In fact, she behaves as if that corpse is still a living person. She gives it food, dresses it up, and sleeps while cuddling up to it.

Due to the acts of the merchants of this country and my mistaken judgement, the young girl ended up losing her mind.

After the two merchants confessed to their crimes, Erize's activities came to light and the rumors spread throughout the country. The people feel sorry for her, but they still began to fear and avoid her.

Erize also began to turn a deaf ear to what the people in the country were saying. She appeared to be frightened by them, and started to avoid the people as well. It has come to the point where we are incapable of doing anything more for her."

And so, the magistrate ended his story. While leaving out the most important detail.

".....So, basically"

I responded with a sigh.

"You took in a cute little girl, but now you want her to leave because she is causing problems for you. However, you are not able to get her to leave because she refuses to listen to what you say. You're afraid to get violent with her because you don't know what she'll do. So you want an outsider to deal with the situation. Is that right?"

"....."

Seeing how he stayed silent like a coward, I added some more words.

"...So you want me to kick her out of the country for a reason like that?"

I went to the half-destroyed house while feeling conflicted about whether I should accept the job or not. When I saw you there, Erize-san, I was

extremely surprised. And so, I decided to take the job. That's because I had already met you once before at the baker's shop.

The day after I met you at the apple stall, I walked around the country talking to people about the situation. Every single one of them said the same thing to me.

"Such a pitiful child."

Even the people I talked to on the street said the same thing.

"I really feel sorry for her."

"She ended up in such a state because of some bad people... it's really deplorable."

The housewives who live in the houses neighboring the one you lived in were also frowning in displeasure.

"She ended up living in a place like that because of what some bad adults did..."

"Yes... it's really quite pitiful. She even refuses to eat the food that the magistrate brings for her."

"Look, over by that wall. See where she threw away that parcel of food? She always does that. Whether it's food or money, she just throws it away."

Even the man who owns the roadside stall said this while rubbing his bandaged hand.

"She'd apparently been stealing apples from my stall for quite a while. Well, I know her circumstances so I wasn't going to hold it against her—I just thought she should eat something other than apples once in a while, so I thought of taking her to some restaurant. After that, she shouted all kinds of stuff at me... and that's how I ended up in this state."

The man who owns the bakery also said this.

“Ah, Witch-san. You saw what happened as well, right? She always comes in here and tries to buy bread with something like that. I understand that she’s to be pitied... but I run a business as well, so I’m having trouble dealing with her.”

The day I first saw you at the bakery, I saw something very strange.

A little girl wearing a deep hood took a large number of dead bugs out of her pocket and tried to exchange those for bread. It was a strange sight.

The girl called those dead bugs, “money”.

After talking for a bit with the owner of the shop who had kindly told her with a troubled expression on his face that he couldn’t give her bread in exchange for bugs, the girl made a shocked expression and ran out of the store.

After seeing that spectacle, I was quite confused.

I found out that it was you on the next day.

That is why I decided to accept this job, for your sake.

○

“You’re lying.”

Erize-san just said that phrase after I told her everything I had seen and heard. She then raised her head while sitting next to Millina-san, and,

“It’s a lie—the whole of this is just lies. Why? Why are you trying to make me suffer as well, Elaina-san?”

“Did someone order you to say this kind of stuff to me? Elaina-san, you saw it too, right? The people in that country are all evil.”

“The people of that country treated me as a monster. They burned down my house. But my little sister isn’t dead. She’s right here, sitting next to me.”

“That’s why, it’s a lie. It’s all just nonsense.”

Saying that, she shook Millina-san's shoulder. The head of the girl who had died a long time ago swayed in a strange manner.

“See? She's still alive. My little sister isn't dead—”

However.

As if to contradict and betray her words, the body fell from the chair after being shaken violently.

With a loud sound, the thing that had once been Millina-san fell to the ground and rolled.

“Ah—”

At that moment, the girl seemed to have realized something.

“N-No... My little sister, Millina is alive——”

She stood up and stretched her hand towards the corpse, but stopped before touching it. Only her fingertips were violently trembling.

Her appearance was incredibly pitiful.

“Erize-san.”

“No, no, no no...! It can't be, it can't be! Millina is... but she was living together with me all this time! She can't be dead...!”

“.....”

“Please come back.”

And so, I told her.

“Please allow me to save you.”

She didn't reply to my words.

The only thing that escaped from her mouth was a wordless muttering.

Her trembling fingers tightly clutched my robe.

No, no, it's a lie, please stop.

She just kept mumbling those words incoherently.

Eventually, her muttering rose to a shriek, and she started to shed tears while clinging to me.

I didn't let her go until her tears finally stopped.

○

“Thank you.”

“Ah, Elaina-sama. Thank you for your efforts... wait, you're eating bread again.”

“Yes, I've grown to like it—although, this is probably the last time I'll get to eat it.”

“.....?”

“Meaning, I've safely completed the job that you gave me. I'm going to leave this country by the end of the day, and I don't intend to ever come near this place again.”

“...I see.”

“As usual, you don't look very happy.”

“As I told you earlier, we didn't want to kick that girl out of our country. It was just that we had no other choice.”

“That doesn't change the fact that you gave up trying at some point along the way—speaking of which, about my reward.”

“.....Ah, yes. That's right. Let's see—”

“You don't need to pay me. Could you deliver it to her house instead?”

“Excuse me?”

“I'm not going to say it again.”

“No, but—”

“In any case, I’m not going to accept it. That’s all.”

“...Elaina-sama, how is she? Has she gotten better?”

“Who knows? There’s nothing I can tell you.”

“I see...”

“Yes. Well then, I’ll be going now.”

“...Please take care.”

“Ah, that’s right. There’s something I forgot to tell you.”

“What is it?”

“When that girl comes here again—please don’t make that sort of expression in front of her, okay?”

○

I stayed with her for quite some time.

The girl ran through the snowy terrain underneath the bright sun while hunting, and the two of us cooked together. We just kept repeating this.

I lived pleasantly in the time that flowed in this manner.

Once Erize-san became proficient at hunting all by herself, she suddenly opened her mouth one day, and,

“I’ve come into my own now.”

She said those words to someone while standing before the graves of her three family members.

“In that case, you don’t need me anymore, right?”

“It’s not like I don’t need you... but thanks for everything you’ve done until now, Elaina-san.”

“You don’t need to thank me—I just did whatever I was capable of.”

“What are you going to do now?”

“I’ll return to my travels.”

“...It’s going to get lonely.”

“...I agree.”

“If you feel that way, I don’t mind accompanying you on your travels.”

“Ah, that’s a little...”

“You’re too damn honest, Elaina-san.”

“What do you plan to do from now on, Erize-san?”

After I said that, she removed the hood that she was wearing and looked up at the sky. Her breath rose up into the air like smoke, and vanished.

The sun floating in the sky gave off a faint sense of warmth, but it was still weak enough to be dispersed by the cold wind.

“I’m planning to return to that country after some time passes.”

Erize-san looked at me and said that.

“...Even though that place is full of nothing but bad memories?”

“Yes. But I feel like I’ll be able to make some different memories if I go there now.”

And then, she said this.

“Besides, I did something bad to the people of that country, so I want to apologize.”

“.....”

“Well, although I’ve said that, I haven’t decided to go there just yet. I just felt that it would be nice to do that.”

“I see. I think that’s a good idea.”

Saying so, I nodded.

“In any case, I’ll go there once I’ve made up my mind and properly said goodbye to everyone here. I just want to stay for a little while longer—until the snow melts.”

At that time, we heard a sound coming from the forest behind us.

Looking around, we saw that some of the snow that was piled up on a tree’s branches had fallen to the ground. A hint of green began to reappear in the world that was dyed a pure white color, gently shaking its head.

The snow will probably disappear soon, a little bit at a time.

However,

“Looks like it’ll still take a while.”

At my words, she gently shook her head and smiled.

“It won’t be much longer now.”



Chapter 7: The Bequeathed Legacy

It happened one day while I was sightseeing in a certain city.

A strange man started talking to me all of a sudden.

“Hey, you’re a witch, right? Does that mean you can ride brooms and stuff?”

What an incredibly idiotic statement.

“Seeing as I’m a witch as well as a traveler, yes, I do ride them.”

I wouldn’t be doing something as troublesome as traveling if I couldn’t ride one.

The man nodded as if he was satisfied with something.

“That’s awesome! Hey, would you be willing to do something for me?”

Without even allowing me to reply, the man pulled out a map and continued to talk.

“Could you take me to this location on the map? I have something that I need to do there.”

“Haa...”

He was enthusiastically pointing to a place on the map, but no matter how you looked at it, it was just an ordinary forest. He had some business in such a place? I wonder, what does he want to do over there? Well, it doesn’t really matter.

I replied,

“Well, I don’t mind taking you there... but you’ll have to pay for the service, you know?”

“You don’t need to worry about that! I’ll properly pay you, so be at ease!”

“In that case, I don’t mind.”

“Ah, that’s great—by the way, I can only pay you once the job is done, is that okay? Hehe.”

“Eh? I’d prefer to be paid in advance.”

Somehow, he doesn’t seem very trustworthy. From his manner of speech, I get the impression that he’ll run away the instant after I take him wherever he wants to go.

“Well, hang on. Don’t be hasty! I’ll pay you properly if you get me there safely. I’m going there to retrieve gold, after all.”

“Oh? From someplace so deep inside a forest? ...Are you going after buried treasure or something?”

I said that in a joking manner. However, he replied with an energetic nod. On top of that,

“That’s exactly right! The legacy my father left me is buried over there!”

He even said something like that, so can you blame me for being surprised?

○

While alternatively looking between the map and the path, I proceeded to go deeper into the forest.

A rope was tied to the handle of my broom, and the other end of the rope was tied to a sled. I was flying towards the place indicated on the map where the treasure was buried while having that man sit on the sled.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaargh!”

I heard such screams from behind me as I continued to travel, but I didn’t pay them any heed. It had been about an hour since I started flying on my broom.

Right after we started flying, the man complained, saying,

“Hey, why am I on a sled? Let me sit behind you.”

However, I honestly replied, saying,

“If you keep saying that, I’m just going to leave you here.”

However, as the time passed, even doing that became troublesome.

To my regret, he appeared to be a person who was fond of talking. While sitting on the sled that was hanging below my broom, he kept talking about his adventures for some reason.

According to him, his father was a legendary gambler. He was also a gambler who had earned a decent amount of money. He followed in his dead father’s footsteps and, until a few years ago, he had made a lot of money through gambling.

However, he recently had kept losing, and was now on a decline.

“I’ll definitely return the money when I win.”

“I promise, I’ll definitely return it.”

Saying things like that, he racked up an enormous debt with his friends, but as he continued to gamble, the money and his luck continued to evaporate like hot water.

What’s more, his friends and acquaintances got tired of dealing with him, and people who had known his father even insulted him saying things like, “The father was blessed, but his son is horrible.”

At this rate he would die a miserable death while shouldering a massive debt—while he was worrying over things like that, he recently had happened to come across a map at his home that showed the location of the treasure his father had buried.

Unbelievable. God has not forsaken me! He had danced for joy while thinking that.

And so, he caught a hold of me, a traveler, and used me as a guide. Perhaps this was something that would make any gambler excited.

I don’t understand it at all, but in any case, that was apparently the situation.

“I’m going to get back at all those people who made fun of me! I’ll show them that an apple doesn’t fall too far from the tree!”

Saying that the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree was originally a way of implying that the child of a mediocre person would also be mediocre no matter how hard they tried...oh well. I let that slide without passing a comment.

After that, he ceaselessly continued to talk about his life so far. Things like what was the most money he had earned in a single day, stories of his passionate love with beautiful women, and many other things in addition.

I made sounds of acknowledgement in the beginning, but even that eventually became annoying.

And so, I purposely chose to fly recklessly.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaargh!”

Ah, this is such a pleasant change.

We finally arrived at our destination.

“Gueeeeeeeeeeh.”

Soon after we landed, he threw up. While supporting himself by putting a hand against a thick tree.

Ugh.

“Are you okay?”

“No problem! My father’s legacy is right in front of my eyes, so something like this is no big deal!”

“Speaking of which, where is the treasure?”

“Umm...”

Wiping his mouth, he looked at the map.

“Maybe over here? Ah, no, it must be over there? Nope, that’s not right either. Umm...”

He walked around in circles while holding the map.

At this rate, maybe he’ll throw up again? He continued to walk all around me while I watched apprehensively.

After some time,

“Ah. It’s this tree. It looks like the treasure is buried under this tree.”

Saying so, he pointed at a certain thick tree.

“.....”

“.....”

It was right beneath the place where he had thrown up.

“...Umm, I’m sorry.”

“...Ah, it’s okay. Don’t worry about it...”

○

I had already finished what I was contracted to do, so of course I didn’t help him dig it up. Doing that would have been a pain, in any case.

I just waited while watching him dig at the roots of the tree with a trowel.

“Treasure...! Treasure...! Treasure...!”

He looked just like a thief.

And so, the time continued to pass as I was feeling bored.

As he continued to dig away, a hole was formed in the ground and a correspondingly large mound of earth had been made beside it, when finally his trowel made a loud metallic sound as it struck something hard.

After I stood up in reaction to the sound, he turned around to look at me and gave me a thumbs up.

“I’ve found it! Look here! It’s the treasure!”

He used his trowel to pry it from the earth, and then threw it towards me. A tin case rolled upon the hard earth.

“Hoho. So the treasure is inside this?”

“You betcha! Let’s open ‘er up!”

Seeing me nod, he opened the case.

After peeking inside, he said,

“Hehehe... now I’m also a wealthy man... Hmm?”

His laugh was transformed into an expression of doubt in a second, and the next instant, he turned pale.

“...? What’s inside?”

Stepping beside him, I peeked into the box.

And then, I saw what was stashed inside.

There wasn’t a single coin inside the box. It was just filled with a large amount of paper.

Friends, relatives, inns, pubs, butchers, and vegetable sellers. The case was filled with details of money his father had borrowed from all kinds of people, the date by when the money was to be repaid, and even the names of guarantors who were to pay in case his father was unable to return the money. It was filled with such details

“My son, please pay the money in my stead. Love, Dad.”

That was the short letter that accompanied those notes.

“No way... how can this be...!? This has to be a lie...! Daaaaaad!”

And then, he pulled out every note the in the box and threw them them out.

Invoices were flying out one after the other. Amongst them, there was a letter.

He apparently didn't see it, and threw it out along with the other notes—this is what was written inside the letter:

“I'm sorry, there is no treasure. In fact, I wasn't some legendary gambler in the first place. My luck was good in the beginning, but eventually I wasn't able to win anymore and I am a horrible father who incurred a massive debt. Please forgive me. While you're at it, please return the money I owe. I've properly explained this to the people I borrowed money from. I'm sure they'll wait until you get the money ready. I'm counting on you.”

It was an excellent demonstration of throwing your troubles onto someone else. It was such a horrible way of dealing with the issue that it almost made you feel refreshed.

“Daaaaaad!”

Looking at the shouting young man from behind, there was just one thought that crossed my mind while I was pitying him.

Indeed, the apple hasn't fallen far from the tree.

Chapter 8: The Country of Honesty

“...The Country of Honesty?”

I was standing in front of the gate of a small country that stood on a coast, and felt confused after hearing what the gate guard had said to me.

“That’s right! Our country is called 『The Country of Honesty』. As the name implies, there are no liars in this country! It’s a crappy country!”

“...Haa.”

“The moment a person passes through the gates and enters the country, they will become unable to tell lies, even if they are a witch.”

I felt a little curious after hearing what the guard said. That was my mistake.

“How exactly does that happen?”

“The sword that belongs to the King of our country has a mysterious power, and apparently that power was used to create a barrier over the entire country which prevents people from telling lies. I know, it sounds incredibly suspicious, but that’s how it works, apparently.”

“.....”

“Well then, Witch-sama, what do you want to do? Do you want to enter our country?”

After hearing what he had to say, I responded.

○

I applied for a stay of three days and two nights, and went through the gate. The early summer breeze that was blowing inside carried a faint hint of salt.

The appearance of the city along the coast was excessively colorful, and the houses that lined the alleyways were painted in blue, red, yellow, green, purple, and many other colors. At any rate, the place was dyed with many

vivid colors. There is no sense of unity in the appearance at all. However, the mixture of colors gave off a good feeling overall.

This country gives off a good feeling.

“Witch-san! Please buy some of our bread! It’s not particularly tasty, and it’s gotten all hard because it’s quite old. The stuff I have here at the counter is actually leftovers from the day before yesterday, but I’m still selling it at the regular price! Come buy some!”

“...No, who would actually buy garbage like that?”

A voice saying unbelievable things was directed at me from a street vendor I happened to pass by, and I unintentionally retorted.

For some reason, my sharp comments are about twice as harsh compared to usual. Is this because I can’t lie?

“What are you talking about? They’ve been lying here for a long time, so of course the taste and quality are going to drop. They are still edible, though! Buy some!”

“.....”

Not being able to lie should be considered sinful.

I had a bad premonition after that incident with the old lady who was manning the roadside stall right after I entered the country, and I was right. The people of this country often mess with other people in quite a similar way.

“Oh my, Witch-san, you’re so cute! It’s pissing me off! By the way, I developed a new perfume the other day, would you like to buy some? I’d rather not sell any to a cute little girl like you but I’m running a business here after all.”

“Hey, good afternoon. To be honest you’re not really my type, you look too childish, and your breasts are also quite lacking, it’s really horrible. I’m kinda

starved for women right now, though, so would you like to grab a bite to eat — Ah, you don't want to?"

Everyone was so honest that I wanted to just call them idiots to their faces. the people who passed by me in the streets were all giving off a dangerous aura because everyone just kept talking about stuff that shouldn't be said aloud.

"Hey, I see you're still bald, as usual."

"And you, as fat as ever, I see."

"I've been thinking this for a while, but you have really bad breath."

"...Hahaha."

"...Hahaha."

The aggressive nature of the people was barely being contained, and was showing through the cracks in their facade.

...What the heck was the king thinking when he decided to turn this country into such a place?

As I continued to walk through the city, the royal palace came into view.

"Half a year has passed since lies have disappeared from my country. What do you say, everyone? Isn't it wonderful to live in a country where there is no deceit?"

At that moment, the young king of the country was in the middle of giving a speech that was receiving great applause.

He held a sword of exceedingly strange design in his hand. It was so strange that I might have blurted out, "Ah, you have bad taste," if he were to ask me for an opinion.

The people who were gathered outside the palace were shouting, and holding placards which said stuff like:

“The King is the best!”

“Thank you for giving us a country without lies!”

“I got a girlfriend thanks to His Majesty!”

“Long live the King!”

Not a single one of them was saying anything coherent, I could only hear people shouting short phrases like “Wa wa” and “Kya kya.”

The king nodded after appearing pleased with the reactions of his subjects, and pointed his sword at the sky.

“Lies are evil! They are despicable! I swear by this sword, I will continue to keep this country pure and free from lies and deceit!”

“I will follow you forever!”

“Your Majesty, I love you!”

“So handsome! Take me!”

“Long live our King!”

The king’s voice grew even louder, as he appeared to be very pleased with the praise from his honest subjects.

“True trust is born from straightforward feelings and words that carry no deceit! Let us lead our country down the proper path by facing each other head on!”

.....

I was watching the speech from afar with feelings that were difficult to put into words, when all of a sudden, someone tapped my shoulder. Looking around, I saw a witch who was wearing a brown-coloured robe and a tricorne.

That woman with messy, brown hair appeared to be in her early twenties.

“...Can I help you?”

After I said that,

『You're the witch-sama dispatched by the Administrative Bureau of Magic, right?』

The woman silently held up a sketchbook with those words written on it with a proud expression on her face.

“.....?”

I shook my head.

“No, I'm not.”

By the way, the Administrative Bureau of Magic is the organization that conducts exams that make you eligible to become a trainee witch, handles incidents caused by magic, and conducts research into developing new kinds of magic—putting it simply, it is a mysterious organization that is involved in all matter related to magic.

“By the way, people from the Administrative Bureau of Magic wear a moon-shaped brooch, you know?”

The only brooch I had was the one on my chest, which was star-shaped and was proof of my being a witch.

After taking the effort to explain this to her in great detail, the woman finally seemed to have realized her mistake—she blushed red out of embarrassment, and quickly started scribbling something with her pen while panicking.

And then,

『I'm sorry, I mistook you for someone else, please forget about what happened earlier!』

She once again held up the sketchbook towards me that had those words written on it, and ran away from me after bowing several times.

What did she want, anyways?

“...Hmm?”

Now that I think about it, what about writing on paper? Was the rule about being honest applicable to that as well?

That question floated to my mind as I considered the strange witch who refused to speak, and the crowd that had gathered around the royal palace.

From my experience, it should have been impossible to lie in this country even through writing. For example, a sweets shop that was selling a “new” type of sweets would have a sign saying “New sweets available!” but that would be followed by something like “They’re actually the same as the old ones, only the appearance has changed.” Other shops, whether they were candy shops, cafes, bookstores, or anything else—they all had signs which were equally horrible.

“New product, recommended by the shop owner! It’s delicious! Sorry, that’s a lie. It’s trash. It’s utter crap. You’ll die if you eat this.”

“A mystery novel by a new author! Even the author of that bestseller was shocked! (at how horrible it was)”

“This new product will ensure that you get a forty percent salary hike! It just feels that way.”

Et cetera, et cetera.

The signboards all had such slanderous words written on them, but none of them appeared to have been written there from the start. They all looked like they were added to the sign later on. In addition, every signboard and advertisement bore signs of trying to erase the text or had been dirtied on purpose, making them very hard to read.

After getting tired of the streets where people were leaking their true intentions in an easily understood manner, I walked towards an inn.

The inn had a sign that read “Extremely cheap lodging! It’s cheap, but very beautiful,” and some other text that couldn’t be seen because the signboard was too dirty.

It’s a country of honesty after all, so what’s written on the sign shouldn’t be a lie. Thinking that, I stepped inside.

“.....”

However, the room that was prepared for me was anything but beautiful. It was trash. It was the worst room I’ve ever been in. I’d probably die if I stayed here.

Does this mean that the owner of this inn considers this to be beautiful...? Apparently, they didn’t have very good eyesight.

I shut myself in the room and pulled a memo pad and pen from my bag while feeling disappointed at this cruel reality.

“...What should I write about?”

I decided to test the current situation and see how it would prevent me from writing lies.

After holding my pen near my mouth and humming for a while, I decided to write about all the things I experienced today.

And so, I wrote it down. I fussed over my writing and forced myself to remember all the details, but I just kept moving my pen.

I see, the magic works in such a way that my hand automatically writes the truth even if I decide to lie. I thought about just making up some random lies, but after I finished writing and looked back at what I wrote, only the truth was written there.

For example, I can think that I want to lie and write “I am actually a man,” but I end up writing exactly the opposite on the paper. If I try to say it aloud,

my voice naturally says the words “I am actually a woman,” and there is no sense of awkwardness at all.

What’s more, any changes I make to to what I have already written or said cannot be lies either. If I try to write or say “The previous statement was a lie,” I actually end up writing and saying “The previous statement is the truth.”

Even if I try to use a different sheet of paper, and experiment with different ways to word it, no matter how much I struggle, the magic was apparently setup in a way that would prevent me from using words to tell a lie.

“...Hmmm.”

This is a strange feeling.

After finding that I was a little addicted to that feeling, I amused myself by experimenting with my body that refused to obey my will until I was exhausted.

“...Huh?”

After continuing to write for a while, I noticed something strange.

I discovered the implicit understanding that the people of this country were keeping silent about after being forced into honesty.

○

I went for a walk inside the country the next day.

Walking around on the absurdly colorful streets, asking the vendors of the street stalls “Is this tasty? Was it freshly made?” and making them give me a truthful confession, I went around buying a lot of tasty and freshly made food while humming a little tune.

Seeing as it was a country on the coast, part of the city faced the sea. I could hear the gentle sound of waves lapping on the shore as I walked around while eating.

This is a nice feeling.

As I thought, this country has a great atmosphere.

“You asshole! I’ll fucking kill you! Freakin’ baldy with bad breath!”

“Shut up, fatass! Your body odor is just as bad!”

“Go die!”

“No, you go die!”

.....

The nice atmosphere was destroyed in an instant.

Looking over in that direction—in the direction I was walking, I could see two men who were wrestling and hurling abuse at each other. One of them was a fat man who looked like he’d explode nicely if I pricked him with a needle, and the other was a bald man whose head was reflecting so much light, it was almost blinding. By the way, they are also apparently suffering from body odor and bad breath respectively.

.....Actually, it’s the same people I saw yesterday.

“...Ha.”

The two of them were embroiled in a violent fight, and they didn’t care about the fact that they were attracting attention from other people in the surroundings. The people who stopped to watch them just stood around while staring, and nobody tried to stop the two men.

Well, the same holds true for me as well.

“Is it okay not to stop those two?”

I called out to a young man who was near me and asked him that. It’s obviously better to stop them but I didn’t want to do it myself, so I was trying to throw the responsibility to someone else.

However,

“Hmm? Witch-san, did you perhaps come here newly from someplace else?”

Seeing me nod, the man laughed.

“Quarrels like this happen all the time in our country. Watching people fight is a good way to relieve stress, though, so nobody tries to stop them.”

“.....”

“Our irritation just keeps building up because of that idiotic king, so this makes for a good diversion.”

That was certainly a strange thing to say.

There seemed to be a large, irreparable divide between the king—who said that true trust could only come from facing each other head on—and his subjects.

“That’s enough, stoooooooooooooop!”

That was when a voice loud enough to make me want to cover my ears reverberated throughout the street.

Looking over at the men who were fighting, I saw a young witch standing at their side, gripping a staff—she was using magic to forcefully stop their fists just before they hit each other.

She appeared to be a little younger than me, and had star-shaped and moon-shaped brooches pinned to her black robe. Her short, glossy black hair swayed as she glared at the two men who had been fighting.

“Stop fighting in the middle of the day for stupid reasons. Can’t you see how you’re troubling the other people around you?”

That girl had a familiar face, and she was wearing a tricorn.

“And you people as well, if you have the time to stand around watching, why not try and stop them? Why do I have to do something like this, when I’m not even from this country?”

It looked like the girl was quite angry.

“.....”

I had given my tricorne to a girl quite a long time ago, and that girl was standing right there.

“...What are you doing in a place like this, Saya-san?”

I walked out of the crowd and stood in front of her. The girl saw me as well, and,

“Eh...? Elaina-san...?”

Her eyes were wide open and her jaw dropped.

Her surprise was so great that she loosened her grip on her staff, and the magic that was stopping the two men from fighting disappeared as well.

Having been released from the constraining magic all of a sudden, the fists of both men crashed into each other's faces at the same time, and they both fell over.

“Ah, I'm sorry.”

An extremely flimsy apology echoed throughout the street.

○

“I never imagined I'd meet you again in a place like this, Elaina-san. This must be fate. It must be fate, right? We should probably just go ahead and get married, right?”

We left the two unconscious men to the people in that area and the two of us talked while walking around the city.

“It really has been a long while. How are you?”

I decided to ignore her thoughtless remarks.

“I’m perfectly fine and full of energy, thanks to this hat. I safely managed to become a witch as well.”

Saya-san gently touched her tricorne. I’m glad that she seems to like it.

“What is your witch name?”

“It’s the Witch of Charcoal.”

“Oh.... It’s somewhat similar to mine....”

I am the Witch of Ashes. They’re almost identical.

“I begged my teacher for a name with kanji similar to ‘Ashes.’”^[3]

Saying that, she proudly puffed out her chest. Due to that action, the two brooches pinned to her robe struck each other and made a noise like a metal chime.

One of them was star-shaped, and the other was moon-shaped.

“So you joined the Administrative Bureau of Magic?”

She nodded.

“Yes. I thought that this would be the quickest way to earn money while traveling.”

If you register yourself with the Administrative Bureau of Magic, you will be given a brooch shaped like the moon and will be qualified to accept requests from regional branches of the Bureau. It looked like she was able to obtain a fairly stable source of income by doing this.

Oh, I see. That means:

“So, you came to this country on a job?”

“That’s right. So I’d appreciate any information you can give me. I don’t really know much about this country.”

“You accepted the job even though you didn’t know much about the country?”

Is she an idiot?

“No, umm, I’m short of money right now because I did some expensive shopping...This particular job has a really high reward, so that’s why I accepted it and came here.”

“.....”

I sighed at Saya-san’s carelessness and lack of planning.

“What were you planning to do if that promise of a reward was false?”

“But this is the Country of Honesty, right? They wouldn’t lie.”

“Apparently, that’s not really true.”

“What do you mean?”

“Saya-san, do you have a spare piece of paper?”

“Yes I do...”

“Here, give that to me.”

“.....?”

With a confused look on her face, she pulled out a thick piece of paper from her pocket and held it out to me.

“Here you go.”

No matter how you look at it, the paper she gave me was the letter of request from this country.

“...It’s not okay to scribble all over something like this, you know?”

What’s more, the paper had sentences written on it in beautiful handwriting, it’s definitely not something that you would feel like scribbling on.

By the way, the contents of the job were as follows:

『To the Administrative Bureau of Magic. We have a request. Our country has currently been transformed into a place with no lies due to the power residing in our king's sword. Not being able to lie is not necessarily a bad thing, but all of us citizens here are highly inconvenienced because of this. Would you please come to our country and fix this problem for us? We will provide the following reward in return for your service—』

Saya-san puffed out her cheeks as she watched me reading the request letter seriously.

“Certainly, this job has a high reward, but the request letter doesn't have the name of the client, their address, or any other contact information. Thanks to that, I have to start with finding the client first. So that paper has no further information that I need. It might look like an important document, but I don't need it anymore. Feel free to stew it, grill it, or eat it, I don't really care.”

“Do you think I'm a goat or something?”

After giving a sigh to the pouting Saya-san, I once again looked at the paper in my hands.

I feel like I've seen this somewhere before. The thick paper looks like it was taken from a sketchbook, and the beautiful handwriting also looked familiar.

.....

Oh, my.

“I think I know the person who wrote this request.”

“Ehh? Really?”

“Do you remember what country we are in right now?”

I said that while returning the thick paper to her.

○

We walked to the area near the royal palace.

Unlike yesterday, there wasn't much of a crowd. People were just passing through the courtyard.

“.....”

“.....”

We discovered the witch-san who we were looking for right away.

『Has anyone seen the Witch-san dispatched by the Administrative Bureau of Magic? She should be wearing a moon-shaped brooch.』

She was wandering around, shoving a sketchbook with those words written on it in the face of everyone who was passing by. She's behaving very suspiciously. She's being very conspicuous.

“Hey! You're here again!? You've been banished from the royal palace, so don't keep wandering around here! You incompetent witch!”

『Hiii! I'm sorry! I'm sorry!』

What's more, she was being pursued by a soldier.

“....Is it that strange person?”

“Yes, it is indeed that strange person.”

I nodded to Saya-san, who looked doubtful.

And so, we chased the witch-san who was running away.

“What a horrible experience....”

After running around for a while, the running witch curled up in a back alley while clutching her sketchbook. Her eyes were full of tears.

I stuck my head out of the alley to make sure that there were no soldiers in the vicinity, and then,

“Hello, how do you do? We met yesterday.”

Saying that, I stood in front of that witch.

She looked very surprised.

『The witch-san from yesterday! What's wrong?』

“If I remember correctly, you were looking for a witch from the Administrative Bureau of Magic, right?”

『Y-Yes, that's right.....』

“Let me introduce you. This is my friend, Saya-san. Apparently, she's the witch who has been dispatched by the Administrative Bureau of Magic.”

I said that with one of my hands resting on Saya-san's shoulder, and pointing at her chest with the other hand.

“Ah, hello.”

Saya-san gave a very half-baked response.

The girl looked very surprised once again.

『That brooch! So you're the witch dispatched by the Administrative Bureau of Magic!? I see... I am the Witch of Quicksand, Eihemia. I am the person who sent a written request to the Administrative Bureau of Magic.』

Saya-san pulled out a thick sheet of paper.

“Are you talking about this letter?”

After nodding several times, Eihemia-san flipped to a new page on the sketchbook and showed us the word 『YES』 on the page, then flipped to a different page and wrote, 『I'm sorry. I was in such a hurry to send it that I forgot to add my name and a meeting place. Tee hee~』

She gave that as an explanation.

It looks like she had prepared some simple words in the sketchbook beforehand. More importantly,

“Umm, can you not speak?”

『YES』

“Why not?”

『The mouth is the source of all evil.』

“Would you mind answering seriously?”

『…There’s a good reason for this.』

So she wrote.

『That reason is also related to the present condition of this country. Would you mind listening to it, as part of the job?』

“Fumu.”

“Ah, please wait for a minute. I want to take notes.”

I nodded, and Saya-san pulled out some paper and a pen. She looked just like a new worker, extremely serious about her job.

After looking at both of us in turn, Eihemia-san started to write.

『Actually, the king’s sword was made by me.』

For some reason, she looked a little proud.

Eihemia-san, who used to work in the royal palace, received the following request from the king.

“Please get rid of all the liars in the country. I wish to only have truthful people as my subjects.”

When she asked for the reason, she found out that he had apparently been lied to and betrayed by a vassal, and he couldn’t stand it anymore. So he decided to get rid of all the liars.

Eihemia-san who deeply respected and one-sidedly loved the king immediately agreed to his request and set about making a plan to get rid of all the liars in the country.

And then, she had an epiphany.

“That’s right! I just need to make a barrier that prevents anyone inside from lying!”

However, making the barrier would require an immense amount of magical energy. So, Eihemia-san sacrificed her own voice in order to create that enormous amount of energy. However, just her voice was not enough. After worrying over it for a long time, she decided to give up her ability as a magic user in order to create the energy.

As a result she became unable to use magic and also lost her voice, but the sword had been completed.

By the way, why had she decided to sacrifice her voice in the first place? When I asked her that in the middle of her story, she wrote down while blushing:

『If I couldn’t lie anymore, I thought I might accidentally tell the king how I felt about him...』

It looks like she was very shy.

She then immediately took the completed sword to the king.

『Your Majesty, as long as you grip this sword with your dominant hand, the people of this country will become incapable of lying. By the way, if you let go of the sword or touch it with any part of your body other than your dominant hand, the effect will disappear. Please accept it.』

In this way, the king would always have to hold on to the present that she made for him. She’s such a schemer.

“...Why must I only use my dominant hand?”

『That’s because the effect will be stronger that way.』

That was a lie. It was actually so that I could stay by his side and serve him after he became incapable of using his dominant hand.

“Fumu.... By the way, why do you not speak?”

The king asked her after feeling curious about her behaviour, and she revealed all of what she had done. After hearing that, he lamented what she had done.

“To think you would go so far to follow my order... If only everyone possessed the same level of loyalty as you, I wouldn’t have had to do something like this...”

『I am not deserving of such praise.』

And then, when the king accepted the sword from her,

“Still, this sword looks so lousy. It’s in such bad taste. I have to keep holding something like this?”

『Eh?』

“...Damn”

His true feelings were exposed.

That day ended with a subtly awkward atmosphere.

Starting the next day, the king used that sword to change the country. To begin with, he used that sword to find his disloyal retainers and banished them one after the other. Following that, he used military force to subjugate the citizens who were displeased at having lost the ability to lie.

And so, the Country of Honesty—or rather, the country where only the citizens who couldn’t stand up to the king were left— was completed in this fashion.

At this point, the only people left in the country were those who would obey the king, no matter what he does. By the way, Eihemia-san was labeled as an

incompetent and banished from the royal palace because she lost her ability to use magic.

『 Apparently, I had no value to him apart from the fact that I could use magic.... 』

After completing her story, Eihemia-san wrote those words in her sketchbook.

Could she have been any more stupid?

“You were hired as a witch, so of course your magic would be the most important thing.”

『 I had hoped that he would allow me to remain by his side even after I lost my ability to use magic. 』

As Eihemia-san was feeling depressed, Saya-san spoke up while standing next to her.

“You gave up both your voice and magic power for his sake, isn’t that kind of heavy? Maybe the king disliked that?”

She delivered such a finishing blow.

She hardly had any right to say such a thing, considering that she immediately started speaking about fate and marriage when we met after a long time.

As I stood there feeling amazed, Saya-san looked at the request letter once again.

“Eihemia-san, your request is to turn this country back to the way it used to be, right? What needs to be done in order to make that happen?”

『 You just need to make the king let go of the sword. 』

“I see...”

Saya-san said that while nodding, and I asked,

“What will happen if the sword is destroyed?”

『The power I put into the sword will disappear, and my voice and magical ability will return.』

“Hoho...”

“In that case, the fastest way to do this would be to destroy the sword when the king comes out to make a speech, like he did yesterday.”

『The king doesn't have any speeches scheduled until next month.』

“Elaina-san, let's share a room and stay here for the next month—”

“Let's think of a different option.”

『If you plan to take the sword away from the king, you will need to enter the royal palace.』

“...But wouldn't it be really hard to get inside if we can't lie? The whole plan will fall apart the moment we are asked why we want to go inside.”

That's true.

“It's the Country of Honesty, after all. We can't lie our way into the palace.”

I continued to speak.

“But if we use what Eihemia-san is holding, then we should be able to manage. Sure, we can't lie in this country, but we can mislead people all we want.”

Even if we can't speak lies in this country, we can manage it somehow when it comes to writing.

Eihemia-san nodded and displayed the page with 『YES』 written on it. It looked like she had already discovered the loophole in the barrier that she had created—the loophole that was implicitly understood by everyone living here. Perhaps it had been created with such an intention from the beginning.

“...? What do you mean, Elaina-san?”

Allow me to explain.

I borrowed the sketchbook and pen from Eihemia-san, and,

“Now, pay attention. This is all we need to do—”

And so, I wrote down the strategy.

.....

At some point, I had been roped into helping Saya-san with her job, but I decided not to touch upon that point until the end.

That’s because in this country where people cannot lie, they will not be able to hide their embarrassment either.

○

“Excuse me. Please state your business. You may not pass beyond this point without His Majesty’s permission.”

As expected, we were stopped at the gate after walking up to the royal palace.

The guard then realized that one of us was none other than Eihemia-san, and he exclaimed,

“Ah, you! What are you doing here!? You’ve been banished from here, haven’t you!?”

『Hiiii! I’m sorry! I’m sorry!』

“Hey, behave yourself.”

Eihemia-san had turned around on the spot and I reached out to grab her by the scruff of her neck before she could run away, and,

“Saya-san, hurry up and explain the circumstances to him.”

Saying that, I lightly pushed Saya-san forwards. Standing in front of the guard, Saya-san boldly pulled out a piece of paper.

“Ahem. Guard-san, do you understand what is written on this paper?”

The dirty, stained paper had the following words written on it.

“The banishment of the Witch of Quicksand, Eihemia, has been rescinded. At the same time, right of entry is granted to The Witch of Ashes, Elaina, and the Witch of Charcoal, Saya.”

Even the King’s signature was properly present at the bottom.

“The banishment was rescinded? How suspicious. Is this genuine?”

Oh, what’s this?

“What are you talking about? This is the Country of Honesty, isn’t it? There’s no way lies could exist here. Or else, are you implying that His Majesty lied to us?”

“...Ugh, you’re right.”

“Now, please let us pass.”

“.....”

The guard moved away from the entrance, albeit reluctantly. And so, we were able to boldly pass through the gate.

While holding the fake document in hand.

This country does not allow one to lie using spoken words. However, the circumstances are different when writing them down.

Unlike speech, characters that have been written down can be erased. It’s very easy to write a lie by jotting down a bunch of random characters in a line and then erasing some select characters.

You can only correct speech with more speech, so it’s impossible to lie while speaking, no matter how hard you try. However there are many ways to alter text even without using a pen.

I discovered this fact while I was writing down random things in my inn room the other day. It appeared as if the dirty, stained signboards of shops in this country had been made in the same way, and I also understood how the inn rooms could be so dirty while the signboard insisted that they were beautiful.

The people of this country had discovered how to lie using written words, but they were keeping that fact a secret.

“It went well. As expected of you, Elaina-san.”

“Why, thank you.”

Saya-san was looking at the paper that I had forged while we were walking inside the castle. Incidentally, the King’s signature was written by me while copying his handwriting. After writing something random like “This is His Majesty’s signature,” mimicking his handwriting and forging his signature next to that sentence was possible. Once that was done, the previous sentence could just be erased to complete the forgery.

『Truly, the pen is mightier than the sword!』

There was a person next me writing down things with a triumphant expression on her face, but I pretended not to see that.

“By the way, Eihemia-san, which way should we go now?”

Saya-san pretended not to see that as well.

『Eh? The throne room, perhaps? His Majesty usually whiles away the time in there.』

“Hoho. So, where is this throne room?”

『It’s still quite far from here.』

“I understand. Both of you, follow me! I’ll protect the two of you!”

“You seem to be all fired up, Saya-san.”

『At any rate, I cannot fight at all, so I'll just hide behind the both of you.』

“Sure, just leave it to me. Taking the sword away from the king should only take me an instant.”

Just where did her confidence come from?

“Do you have a plan?”

“Well, for starters, I'll go in from the front and say, 「Hey there, I'm a witch from the Administrative Bureau of Magic, and I'm currently doing some research on magic. Would you mind letting me take a look at that beautiful sword?」 Once I say that, he's sure to give me the sword. See, isn't that a perfect plan? Hehehe~”

“True, I have never seen a plan so perfectly full of holes.”

『There's no way he would let go of my sword for such a flimsy reason!』

We have two witches here, so the best way to do it would be to have one of us distract him from the front while the other sneaks up on him from behind and steals it. Actually, we don't even need two witches for this.

Well, it'll work out somehow if we make up some kind of a plan before we confront the king—thinking that, we proceeded to walk deeper into the royal palace.

And that's when it happened.

“What's all this noise about? What is going on—”

The king came out of the door directly in front of us.

He actually came out at a time like this.

Why was that, though? Wasn't he supposed to be in a place still far away from here?

When I looked around while having a question mark floating above my head,

『I'm sorry, we have reached the throne room. It was unexpectedly not that far away.』

So said the words, written by Eihemia-san.

It was a very insufficient apology, in more ways than one.

○

“Seeing as you’ve already found us, I guess we have no choice. Your Majesty, please let go of that sword at once.”

I instantly saw that it was impossible to end things peacefully, so I pulled out my staff and walked towards the king, and made him return to the throne room.

However, while retreating, the king shouted,

“Intrudeeeeeeeers!”

Regrettably, he called for help.

Immediately after, there was a large number of voices saying things like “What’s going on?” and “Who’s there?” and “That was His Majesty’s voice!” and a large number of guards entered the room through the open door.

Our retreat was instantly cut off.

Hmm.

“Saya-san. I will deal with the king. Please do something about the guards.”

“Leave it to me!”

Saya-san also took a stance with her staff. As for Eihemia-san, she had ended up beside me by chance and was holding up a sign saying 『Ah, I am a non-combatant!』

She has no intention to help at all. Oh well, I guess it’s better than her just jumping in blindly.

“Your Majesty, please give that sword to me.”

I slowly walked closer to the king.

“Silence! Shut up! Damn you, Eihemia... What are you trying to do?”

『 Your Majesty, that artifact is very dangerous. Although that might sound ironic, coming from the person who made it. 』

Eihemia-san was holding up her sketchbook while standing behind me.

『 So please, return that to me. 』

“What are you saying? This sword is truly the perfect weapon to guide this country. As long as I have this, I can lead this country in the correct direction.”

And then, the king said,

“Even if there are some bad people who are after my sword, I can take care of them by myself—like this! ”

The king swung the sword horizontally in a straight line.

A mass of magical energy was released from the hand of the king. A pale light in the shape of a crescent flew towards me, carried by the momentum of his swing.

“Whoops.”

I dodged it like it was nothing.

It hit Saya-san instead.

“Ouuuuuuuuch!”

An agonized wail echoed throughout the chamber.

“Ah, I’m sorry.”

“Uuu... So mean...”

By the way, I didn't hear anything about that sword being capable of producing magical energy.

『That sword is capable of releasing accumulated energy by the action of swinging it, so be careful. It'll hurt like hell if it hits you.』

Isn't that warning a little too late?

“Tch... As expected, ordinary methods will not work against a witch—in that case, how about this? Ei!”

Saying that, the king swung the sword several times, shooting waves of magical energy at me.

I carefully struck down each of them so that they would not hit Saya-san. From behind me, I could hear Saya-san shouting things like “Orya!” and “Damn you!” as she valiantly fought to protect my back.

“Your Majesty, has this country become a better place now that the lies have disappeared?”

“Of course it has! Can't you see how happy the citizens of my country are?”

“Isn't that because you only let the people who approved of your vision of a country stay behind, and kicked out everyone else?”

“It's the same thing. What's wrong with stamping out the seeds of rebellious intent?”

“You're right—I agree with you on that point. On the other hand, there is a possibility that not all the people remaining here approve of what you're doing.”

“.....What did you say?”

As the king furrowed his eyebrows in doubt, I thought back on all the things I had seen after coming to this country; the signboards on the shops and the men who were fighting.

“This is the Country of Honesty, right? There are a lot of people who confess their true feelings, and sometimes come to blows when they express themselves frankly. But there’s undeniably a sense of malice hiding in the background.”

The people of this country often say things that are better left unsaid, but that’s probably not out of good intentions. It might just be due to accumulated stress.

It’s the same with writing all those unnecessary things as well. Actually, that additional writing on shops might have been done by some malicious individual.

Although the people were making a show of appreciation while gathered in the courtyard of the royal palace, not a single one of them actually said anything meaningful aloud. This was probably because they were hiding their true feelings.

“Being honest is not necessarily always the best option. That’s why this world has the concept of lies—”

“Elaina-san! Sorry to interrupt, but we’re out of time! There are too many enemies for me to handle. My head is going to go flying! Iyaaaaaaa!”

『 Good luck, Witch-san from the Administrative Bureau of Magic. 』

“You should help out toooooooooo!”

『 I’m sorry, I specialize in inspections and the like. 』

.....

“It looks like we’re out of time, so let’s wind things up here.”

However, the king snorted at my proposal.

“Wind things up? Who are you trying to fool? It’s taking everything you have to just deflect my attacks.”

“.....No, I’m sorry. I’ve already completed the preparations necessary to take the sword away from you.”

“Hmpf. You’re obviously bluffing.”

“Can you still say that after seeing what is behind you?”

“.....What?”

Without ceasing his attacks on me, the king quickly peeked behind him. When he saw what was there, his attacks abruptly ceased.

The broom that I had secretly brought here was floating in the air behind him.

“What!? When did you—”

Without even allowing the king to complete his sentence, I moved the broom towards me. As fast as I could make it go.

Right after that, a dull thump reverberated through the air and the broom impacted the king squarely in the back. The king gave a low groan and was thrown towards me.

The sword that he had held up until that point, fell from his fingers.

“Ei.”

Seeing that, I conjured up a large lump of iron using magic and sent it flying at the sword as it fell towards the ground. After making a heavy sound, the lump of iron easily broke the sword into two pieces and then made a small crater on the ground.

Once the sword broke with a nice, clean sound, a large amount of magic was immediately released from the sword, and the pale light returned to Eihemia-san. The sparkling grains of light looked like the stars in the night sky.

After being entranced by that sight for a short while, I leaned forward and said,

“People with evil intentions can still do bad things even if they cannot lie. All the people remaining in this country are not necessarily good people.”

“.....”

“Similarly, not everyone who lies is a bad person.”

If the truth is like a sword, then lies are the sheath. The truth is encased in lies to prevent it from hurting people for no reason.

Lies can also be used in such a way.

“.....”

The king slowly moved his body and crouched down on the spot.

He just kept staring at one spot on the floor. Maybe he’s thinking about something, or he’s just depressed.

After a few very long seconds passed,

“So what are you saying...!? Are you saying I was mistaken...?”

He vaguely whispered those words.

“No, you were not mistaken.”

An unfamiliar voice replied to the king’s words.

It was immediately apparent who had said that. It was Eihemia-san, whose voice had returned.

“Your Majesty, you were just a little too honest with your own feelings. From now on, why don’t you relax a little and live a life where you can lie when needed and stay silent about things that don’t need to be said?”

Eihemia-san said that while smiling gently.

Was that really the truth, or was it a lie to make the king feel better?

Honestly, I can’t tell anymore.

This is what happened afterwards.

The king publicly apologized for turning the country into a place where people couldn't live for more than half an year. He said that everything that had happened so far was his fault, and he sincerely asked the people to forgive him.

The reactions of the people were surprisingly indifferent. There was no riot, and nobody booed the king while he spoke. They just accepted the apology while looking unconcerned, and once the speech ended, there was some scattered applause in the courtyard of the royal palace.

Most likely, the king has not yet recovered the trust of his people.

After recovering her voice and magic, Eihemia-san was reinstated to her old position and was now working in the palace.

"It's going to get busy from now on!"

She was full of excitement while saying things like that. Her eyes were sparkling as she stood next to the king who was busy dealing with the aftermath of this event.

It looks like it will still take some time until the king finishes his work and the country goes back to how it used to be.

"Elaina-san, about the reward for this job."

Saya-san held my sleeve and said that after we passed through the gates of the country and went outside.

"What is it?"

"You helped out with this job as well, so I think... I think you deserve to get a reward."

"Eh, but I don't want it."

"It doesn't work that way."

Saya-san said as she lowered her eyebrows.

“We need to share the reward with any magicians who helped during the job, that’s the rule. I need to do something to thank you for your efforts.”

“If you keep doing everything by the book, you’ll become an inflexible person.”

Besides, I didn’t do what I did this time because I wanted money. Not that I said that aloud, though.

“Still, please let me do something to thank you!”

“...No, really, it’s fine.”

This girl was pestering me saying she wanted to thank me, and I kept refusing.

It was a strange feeling.

“In that case, let’s do this. I need to thank you for giving me the hat as well, so I’ll give you something nice!”

After clapping her hands, she searched her bag and pulled out something small.

She held two small necklaces in her hand, and pushed one of them into my hands.

“...What is this?”

I asked while accepting the necklace, and she made a pleased sound.

“This is something I used all my money to buy, in preparation for when I would meet you again, Elaina-san. By the way, the reason I was broke was because I spent my money on these. That’s the reason why I accepted this job, but I happened to meet you because of it, so it really is fate, isn’t it!”

“Eh, that’s pretty heavy.”

I thought it was heavy enough to equal Eihemia-san's actions. So she kept badgering me about wanting to thank me so that she could give me this? So cunning.

“Please think of that as me and keep it safe!”

“.....”

I don't really want to accept something like this.....

I mean, I would remember this every time I looked at it. It might make me sad. It is not good for a traveler to accept things like this.

.....

After silently looking at that necklace and Saya-san for a few seconds, I said,
“Thank you. I will take good care of it.”

Oh well, it should be fine. That's what I thought.

It might not be bad to relax once in awhile and do things differently for a change.

“Well then, I guess we part ways here—I'm heading to the branch office of the Administrative Bureau of Magic, and you're going to continue your journey, right, Elaina-san?”

“That's right.”

I replied while putting on the necklace.

“It's time to say goodbye, Saya-san.”

“...I hope we can meet again somewhere in the future.”

“If that comes to pass, we will meet again. If not, this is the last time we will see each other.”

“I definitely won't let it be the last time.”

Saying that, she held up her little finger and extended her hand towards me.

“...What are you doing?”

“This is a charm for making a promise, it’s been passed down in my birthplace for ages! Please wrap your little finger around mine.”

“.....”

Just how does wrapping my little finger around hers constitute a charm?

I extended my little finger towards her while still holding some doubts.

She wrapped her little finger around mine.

“Elaina-san, it’s a promise. We must definitely meet again.”

Saya-san smiled and said that. She also said that she would become an even better witch by that time.

And so, I responded,

“I will patiently wait for that to happen during my travels.”



Chapter 9: The Story of a Bomb

It was a forest with many tall, thin trees.

I was flying on my broom over a meandering path that looked like it had been made to follow the chance gaps occurring between trees. The leaves that had fallen on the ground writhed and made a rustling sound.

The climate is cool, and the wind is gentle. Really, this is a great feeling.

Taking a nap in a place like this would probably feel really good.

“.....”

After continuing to travel through the forest for a while, I saw a horse-drawn wagon. The wagon was entirely devoid of any luggage, and deplorably, it was stopped right in the middle of the road and blocking the way.

I could only see the back of the wagon from my position, and hence I wasn't able to see the driver. Is he taking a carefree nap? Or is he trying to say that he won't allow anyone to pass beyond this point?

“.....Ei.”

I inclined my broom upwards a little as I had no other choice. The broom that had been flying close to the ground gradually floated upwards.

Obstacles must be overcome, after all.

When I was above the wagon, I looked downwards. What I saw there was the roof of the wagon, a horse eating grass—and a man who was collapsed beside the wagon.

I immediately understood why the wagon was stopped in the middle of the road.

The driver was not slacking off and taking a nap, nor was he blocking my path on purpose.

“.....”

The man was covered in blood and wounds. He was collapsed limply beside the wagon.

○

Just what happened here?

I had no idea what the circumstances were, but it was clear that the driver's life was in danger. I felt that flying off and leaving him in this state would be far too cold hearted, so I landed my broom, pulled out my staff, and healed his wounds with magic.

A warm, white haze wrapped around him and erased the bloody wounds and bruises that covered his body.

He looked quite young, but he was still older than me. I'd guess he was somewhere in his mid twenties. His unkempt black hair looked dull as it was covered in dust.

“.....Ugh.”

Just as the wounds on his body finished fading from sight, he opened his eyes.

He stared blankly at the canopy of the forest, and eventually he spotted me.

“Are you okay?”

I spoke to him while standing over him.

“.....”

I didn't receive an answer.

“Umm... Are you okay?”

I tried waving my hand in front of his eyes.

“.....”

He blinked rapidly, opened and closed his mouth a few times, and finally moved his body.

“E-Excuse me...! I’m not sure who you are, but do you know how long I’ve been lying here?”

Perhaps he’s not completely awake yet? He seemed a little hysteric as he asked that question.

“I just happened to find you as I was traveling, so I have no idea—but it was probably not a very long time.”

The blood from his wounds hadn’t finished drying, after all.

“T-Thank goodness! In that case, I can still make it on time...! Umm, I’m not sure who you are—”

“Elaina. That’s my name.”

“Elaina-san! Would you please listen to my wish!?”

He came towards me looking like he was about to grab my hand, so I courteously declined while avoiding him.

“Sorry, I’m in a hurry.”

“P-Please, just hear me out first!”

“.....Ha.”

I can hardly be blamed for sighing. I could sense some annoying problem closing in on me from behind.

I was already half-weary of the incident and then he started talking to me desperately.

“I know that I’m being very shameless, asking this of you after you saved my life. However, something horrible will happen at this rate! Please, I beg you! Please help me!”

He knelt down on the dirt and bowed to me over and over again. He kept begging me to help him...

...I feel like I've experienced something similar in the past.

After thinking about it carefully, it was a similar situation where I was entangled in some strange business after healing someone.

I felt like it was my fate to be unable to escape. Is there something about me that makes me get mixed up in the issues of injured people whom I happen to heal?

I surreptitiously touched the brooch on my chest to make sure it was still there, and replied.

“Well, I can listen to what you have to say, at least.”

After hearing that, he quickly blurted out:

“At this rate, a lot of people are going to die!”

He said that in a hysteric voice.

That certainly caught my attention, although I still didn't understand what this was all about.

In the end, I heard the whole story from him.

Apparently, he was a merchant who drove his own carriage. Due to his job, he was currently transporting certain cargo to the country just ahead of where we were. However, his wagon suffered an unexpected trouble while he was on his way.

To put it briefly, he was attacked by bandits.

On his side it was just one horse and a weak man, and on the other side were dozens of robust men. There was no way he could win. He was easily pulled from the wagon and then beaten, kicked, and cut up by the bandits who then proceeded to strip him of all his valuables.

“Oh my, that sounds awful.”

“Yes, it really hurt a lot. The only silver lining is that I didn’t end up dead.”

“—So? How does the fact that you were attacked by bandits lead to a lot of people dying?”

Was he actually from a royal family, disguised as a merchant? When he said that a lot of people were going to die, did he mean that the bandits would be massacred as retribution for what they did to him?

“Umm... My cargo was actually a bomb, which was ordered by the country that I was heading to.”

“A bomb?”

“Yes. They said something about using it to make a tunnel or something. I didn’t really understand it. They agreed to pay an absurdly high price for it, so I had it made for them.”

“Hoho. How much?”

“It was about ten thousand gold coins.”

I felt my head start to ache. It’s just an explosive to open a tunnel, what’s with that incredibly high price? Are they idiots?

I could vaguely guess what happened next.

“So basically, these bandits have got their hands on an incredibly expensive bomb, and you’re worried that they might put it to evil use—is that what you meant?”

“That’s right. This is a serious problem. If the bandits take the bomb back to my country, a lot of people might die.”

“Yes, it’s really a serious problem.”

Judging by what he said earlier, it sounds like he doesn't particularly care about what will happen if the bandits take the bomb to the country ahead of us instead.

What's up with that? Are they on bad terms? If they are, then why did he prepare the bomb?

"That's right... More importantly, that bomb is dangerous as it will blow up instantly if you make even the smallest mistake in handling it."

"What the heck..."

"As one of the people involved in creating the bomb, I can tell you that it has an extremely complicated structure. The explosive strength of the bomb is also quite high, matching the price that was paid for it."

"You helped make the bomb?"

"Yes. I drew up the blueprints, and also wrote the user manual."

"....."

He said that he just helped to make the bomb, but he actually turned out to be the most important man involved in the process.

Should he be called a merchant, or an inventor?

If he's the inventor, why did he lie and say he's a merchant?

"The operation of the bomb is fairly simple, but there's a chance that it could be used for the wrong purpose."

"So basically, you're saying that even the bandits can easily use it?"

"That's how it is. The bomb is easy to use, so I don't know what will happen in the future..."

"....."

The man probably wants to prevent the bandits from using the bomb to attack his home. I see, now I understand why he was so hysterical.

Having his own creation used to destroy the country he came from, there could be nothing sadder than this.

“Something very bad will happen at this rate. I need to get the bomb back from the bandits, no matter what.”

What he said was true. It was clear that things would take a turn for the worse if nothing was done.

There is no time to be indecisive. At this rate, some people will die for certain.

After unconsciously taking my broom into my hand, I realized that I had become impatient as well.

“I’ll try and track the bandits from above. You should go to the country ahead and report that the bomb was stolen.”

“.....”

The man looked bewildered for a second, and then,

“Ah, yes, I understand.”

He said that and jumped onto his wagon.

And then,

“Right then, let’s go.”

It happened right after I said that and mounted my broom.

The dreadful sound of an explosion reverberated throughout the forest.

The shockwaves that could be felt on my skin made the plants shake and sent the animals into a frenzy. Looking up, I saw that the birds were flying away while making a loud noise.

We both looked at each other.

He had several different types of expressions running across his face.

At this point, I slightly regretted the time wasted by standing around talking in a leisurely manner.

○

I shook off the young man who panicked and kept saying “Please wait, I want to come along too,” and went over there alone.

I didn’t want him to see the results of the bomb that he had designed himself... or rather, that was just an excuse. To be honest, I was probably panicking and not thinking clearly at that time either. The explosion that had reverberated throughout the forest was just that powerful.

After getting on my broom and flying above the treetops, I was able to see some thin, brown smoke rising into the air towards the south.

After moving towards the place the smoke was coming from, I saw that there was a small village there. Or rather, it was a place where a village used to exist.

“.....”

There was nothing left alive. Blood, flesh, and viscera were spread everywhere.

Both the people and the wooden structures that barely rated as houses had been completely destroyed. Everything there was in pieces, as if they had been cut apart by a sharp blade.

Near the center of the village, there was a large hole that looked like a crater created by the impact of some large object. A large cloud of sand and dust had been expelled into the air from that area, and it was still rising up into the air like smoke.

“.....”

After that, I found two scraps of paper among the debris over there.

One of them was the user manual.

The other was a letter.

I went ahead and read it.

“...So that’s how it is.”

After putting those items into my pocket, I returned to where the man was waiting and told him only about the state of the place where the bomb had exploded. After hearing my report, he replied,

“I see... That’s unfortunate.”

That’s all he said.

“Are you okay, Merchant-dono!? We heard an incredibly loud sound from the direction of the forest...”

After we followed the road to the country on the other side of the forest, the person who greeted us was not the gate guard, but a consul from the country. As is often the case, the consul was also flustered and panicking.

“Consul-sama—I’m extremely sorry.”

After saying that, the man briefly explained what had happened to him while he was on the way here. The Consul showed a lot of grief when he heard the reason behind the sound of the explosion.

“What... Such a thing... Merchant-dono, are you uninjured?”

“I was healed by this Witch-sama who just happened to find me while she was passing by... actually, my injuries do not matter. More importantly, I lost the bomb that was supposed to be used to excavate the tunnel. It happened because of my lack of ability. There is no doubt that this incident is entirely my responsibility.”

“Not at all! Please don’t blame yourself. This was just an unfortunate accident. It is truly sad that some people lost their lives because of this...”

Hmm.

“But those people were bandits, right? Wouldn’t you say that they brought this upon themselves?”

I interrupted their conversation with that comment. The Consul glared at me.

“Witch-dono. I cannot approve of such a statement. They were still people even if they were bad natured. It’s only natural to feel sad when people have lost their lives.”

“.....”

Did he actually just say that?

I touched the pocket where I had stashed the letter, but didn’t say anything more.

The young man ignored me and continued to give an explanation.

“In any case, I am really sorry for what happened... Please, could you give us another chance?”

“Hmm? A chance?”

“Could you please allow us to prepare another bomb for you? You need not pay for it. In fact, we don’t require payment for the first bomb either. There will be a considerable delay until we can deliver it, so I will use my authority to commission another bomb for you free of cost, as an apology.”

The Consul showed an exaggerated look of surprise when he heard the man’s proposal.

“No way...! We can’t have that! Actually, we were ready to offer you a token of our sympathy instead.”

“Please, such a thing is not necessary. I just want to fulfill my responsibility. Please, won’t you allow me to deliver the bomb for your country’s sake?”

“No, really, that’s...”

“No, this is just the right thing to do.”

“.....”

That conversation where both of them were shamelessly spouting transparent lies finally came to a close, with the agreement that the man would prepare another bomb and the Consul would pay a token of their sympathy.

That token of their sympathy was one hundred gold coins.

The amount was far less than the original price of the bomb, but would the man—no, the people from his country really be okay with this?

“.....”

I just stayed silent the entire time and didn’t say a single thing.

“In that case, let’s meet here after a week.”

I looked at the retreating figure of the man who said that while waving.

○

One week later, I once again met that man on the road in the middle of the forest.

“Hey, how are you? What a coincidence, meeting in such a place.”

I stopped in front of the wagon and waved to him. The man looked at me from atop the wagon and,

“Hey, Witch-san. Thank you for helping me last week. I’m really grateful to you for healing my injuries.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Would you like to ride along on my wagon? I’ll treat you to some food, as thanks for last time.”

“Ah, no thanks. I’m in a hurry.”

“That’s a shame—In that case, I guess we part ways here.”

Saying that, he cracked his whip and got the wagon moving again. However, he came to a stop again almost immediately.

The horse stamped its hooves in place and gave an annoyed snort.

I had stopped it from moving. I stopped it a little forcefully, by patting the horse's head.

“...? What are you doing?”

The man looked at me and gave me a smile tinged with a little fear.

I was standing in front of the wagon, and blocking its path.

“Nothing, there's just something that I needed to let you know.”

“...? What's that?”

“Actually...”

I spoke to him.

“About that bomb, the country withdrew the purchase order.”

“...What did you say?”

“Oh, my. Were you not able to hear me at this distance?”

“I heard you just fine, I just don't understand what you mean. Why did they withdraw the purchase order? And why am I hearing this from you?”

“Who knows? Perhaps they realized what you were attempting to do with that bomb?”

“.....”

“It looks like your country was planning on doing something very insolent.”

“.....”

I continued to talk as I walked towards the wagon.

“There’s a bomb in your wagon now, right? It is made similar to the last one?”

Saying that, I opened the back and looked inside.

What I saw inside was definitely a bomb... or rather, it was a bunch of bomb components.

Last time, when I had visited what was left of the bandits’ village, I had found a user manual that explained how to assemble the bomb. There were also some strange warnings that said 『Caution: This bomb might explode at the slightest mistake,』 and 『Please assemble the bomb inside the country before taking it to the excavation site.』

“You intended to have the bomb malfunction from the start, didn’t you?”

“No. That was truly an unfortunate incident.”

“What was unfortunate? The fact that it was bandits who died due to the explosion, and not people of that country?”

“...Just what have you been talking about since earlier?”

It was pretty simple.

There were many strange things about the bomb that he had been transporting.

Despite his insistence that it was meant to be used for excavations, its lethality was absurdly high. In addition, it was in an incomplete state that would cause it to malfunction easily.

What’s more—this is just my own speculation, by the way—there’s a good chance that the user manual itself had wrong instructions that could cause an accidental malfunction. All of this seems to indicate that the people who had built this bomb intended to have it malfunction and kill a lot of people right from the start. Perhaps they wanted to have it assembled inside the country, so that it would explode there and cause a great deal of confusion inside?

“I have a message from the Consul of that country. Would you like to hear it?”

“.....”

I took his silence as consent and continued to speak.

Seeing as he lied to me, I'll lie to him in return.

“‘We will never order anything from that country again. We never want to be involved with them again...’ That’s what he said. So please take that bomb with you and go back.”

“...You’ve got to be joking. Just how much money did you think we put into making this bomb—”

“Ah, that reminds me. Here’s the money they said they would give you as a token of sympathy. It’s not much, but please accept it.”

I cut him off in the middle of his sentence and put a bag with one hundred gold coins in his wagon.

It was unexpectedly heavy. Ridiculously heavy, even.

I continued to speak to him while rolling my shoulders.

“That should be enough, right? Now, go back to your own country.”

And then I said,

“Why not use that bomb to make a tunnel or something?”

○

This happened about a week before I saw him for the second time.

It was right after he and the Consul had finished their conversation full of transparent lies. I pulled a certain letter out of my pocket.

“Consul-san, does this look familiar?”

It was the letter that I had found amidst the wreckage of the bandits’ village.

“...! That is...”

Seeing the letter, the Consul-san turned pale.

“So you’re familiar with this, after all.”

I mean, of course he would be familiar with it.

The Consul-san’s signature was written perfectly at the bottom of the letter, after all.

I wondered what business the consul of a kingdom had with a bunch of bandits, so I carefully read the letter. The more I read, the stranger it seemed.

『I want you you to steal the bomb that is meant for excavating the tunnel. If you succeed, I will pay you one hundred gold coins.』

Summarizing the contents of the letter, that was basically what it said.

It’s the sort of thing that makes you want to say, “Oh, what’s this?”

“It looks like that attack by the bandits wasn’t just a coincidence.”

Most likely, the ambush had been set up in advance. Perhaps he thought that it would be more profitable if he got the bomb from bandits whom he owed nothing to, rather than spend ten thousand gold coins on purchasing the bomb from a country they were already on bad terms with.

How stupid can someone get?

“...What is it you wish for, Witch-sama?”

Is he trying to bribe me to stay silent?

“Are you saying you’ll give me something?”

“If you’re willing to say nothing about this matter, then yes.”

“I see.”

And then, I decided to tell a lie.

“In that case, you should prepare something to give to the merchant as well. For what it’s worth, he saw the corpses of the bandits, and read this letter as well.”

“What...? But, he promised to build a new bomb for us...”

“Oh? That new bomb might be something used for revenge against your country, you know? I’d suggest that you refuse to accept anything that is brought over from that country.”

“.....”

I then said to the consul who was silently thinking,

“Ah, that’s right. About the price for buying my silence...”

I put a hand on his shoulder, and said,

“How does one hundred gold coins sound?”

“Considering that it’s for the sake of keeping this a secret from that country you hate so much, isn’t it rather cheap?”

I said that to him as well.

○

It’s always sad to see people losing their lives, so I think I did my part in keeping any more sadness from accumulating.

Even so, as a traveler, whatever became of those two countries in the end was not my business. If I had to guess, I’d say they are still in a chilly relationship where both sides want nothing to do with each other.

The country who wanted to use bandits to bring misfortune upon the other country that they hated.

And the country who set up a bomb in such a way that it would kill the people of the hated country that used it.

Both of them were incredibly stupid. Even so, having a chilly relationship with each other is probably better than having bombs go off. Given enough time, perhaps, both the bombs and the hatred they have for each other will be eroded.

That is why, I sincerely hope that those two countries will keep waiting. Until the day comes when their current relationship ceases to exist.

Chapter 10: Tales of Travels

This happened a while ago, back when I met my teacher Fran-sensei once again.

“You know, there was a time when I, inspired by 『The Adventures of Nike』, used to write a novel while traveling as well.”

Sensei suddenly started talking about that, as if she remembered something.

“...Haa. I see.”

“You don’t look interested at all.”

“Not at all. I’m bursting with excitement.”

“Considering that, your reaction was fairly dull.”

“I was just wondering how I should respond, that’s all.”

I actually thought *What on earth is this person suddenly talking about*, but that’s a secret.

“Judging from how you said that you *used* to write it, I assume you stopped writing it halfway through?”

“No, that’s not it. Rather than saying I stopped writing it halfway through, it would be more accurate to say that the circumstances forced me to stop writing it halfway through.”

“Hmm? What do you mean?”

“It was something I wrote as a hobby and never showed to anyone else. I decided to re-read it after filling up roughly one hundred pages of manuscript paper, but it was so pathetic that I felt embarrassed and lost interest in continuing it.”

Reading over it again sent a shudder down her spine. That’s what Sensei told me while dropping her shoulders.

“So that was the circumstance that forced you to stop writing?”

“Yes. It made me think 『Yuck, is my sentence composition really this bad...?』 I decided to never write something like that ever again, and sealed it away at the bottom of my bag.”

“Ah, you couldn’t bring yourself to throw it away?”

“I still did my best while writing that manuscript, so I didn’t feel like throwing it away.”

“...Despite what you said, maybe you actually liked it?”

“Well, I guess you could say that. Even that pitiful past of mine was also a part of me, so I didn’t feel like throwing it away. At that time, at least.”

“Fumu.”

I nodded.

After that, Sensei’s shoulder’s dropped even further and she gave a deep sigh.

“Of course, I never intended to show it to anyone else. It was something I just wanted to keep as a personal memento, after all—however, my luck took a turn for the worse.”

“What happened?”

“It happened when I visited a certain country. A merchant who saw the bag I was holding said this—”

“Hey, you! Could that be the Legendary Traveler’s bag? I’m sure it is! There’s no mistake! Without a doubt, that’s the bag that was used by the Legendary Traveler. Hey, sell that to me! Please!”

—Apparently, he said something like that.

Fran-sensei was perplexed, wondering what on earth he was talking about. It was a cheap bag that she had purchased at a low price from a pawnshop somewhere. She didn’t have the faintest idea what he meant by a Legendary

Traveler, and of course, she hadn't imagined that the bag might be something so important when she had bought it.

"Well, I guess the value of something changes depending on the person. That merchant offered me an incredible amount for the bag. I was very surprised. I even wondered if it was some new kind of scam."

"Fumu...."

I slowly started to see where this story was going.

"At that time, I was very short on money... so I sold it to him without a second thought. I pulled out my belongings, purchased another cheap bag on the spot, stuffed my belongings inside, and handed the old bag over to the merchant. Of course, I only did that after receiving the large amount of money in advance."

"....."

"A manuscript that you have written by yourself is like a narcotic. Every once in a while, you get an urge to read it once again. A few days after I handed over my old bag to that merchant, I searched through my new bag for the bound pages of my novel which were full of pitifully composed sentences. And that's when I realized the terrifying truth."

"....."

Don't tell me.

"The novel wasn't in the bag?"

".....Surprising, isn't it? I had handed over the old bag with the manuscript paper still inside."

"Uwaah."

"I immediately back to the place where I had met the merchant, but it had already been a week since I had sold him the bag. The merchant had already

gone to a different country by then. Even then, I continued to search for that merchant, but never mind him, I could find no trace of the bag either.”

So that’s what happened.

Fran-sensei covered her face with her hands.

“...Every once in a while, I think about it. What if that manuscript found its way into the hands of some person, and they read it? What if they make fun of me because of that...”

“Sensei...”

Her ears are bright red. Is this person alright?

“Every time I think about the days when I used to travel and remember the time when I lost the manuscript, I can’t help but feel incredibly embarrassed. I feel shudders run down my spine. Aah, aah, what should I do...”

“.....”

I didn’t have anything to say about the matter, so I elected to remain silent.

After remaining silent for a while, Sensei removed her hands from her face and continued talking like nothing had happened.

“Anyways, I just remembered that something like that had happened. It’s certainly embarrassing, but at this point it’s just a memory from the past. It makes for a good tale about my travels.”

“...Haa. I see.”

“You don’t look interested at all.”

“Not at all. I’m bursting with excitement.”

By the way.

“So, why did you bring this up now?”

“Isn’t it obvious?”

Sensei then said to me,

“As long as you continue your travels, I’m sure you’ll experience many things.”

After a brief pause, Sensei looked straight at me.

“If we happen to meet again in the future, please talk to me about your happy memories—the tales of your travels.”

Sensei said that with a kind smile.

○

Just around that time, I remembered that conversation I had with Sensei.

“.....”

It was when I happened to visit a bookstore in a certain country.

“『The Adventures of Fran』...?”

The name I was familiar with was carved into the title of that book.

Incidentally, the author was also Fran. So many familiar things here.

.....

I immediately started reading the book on the spot. Reading it without buying might have been a breach of good manners, but that’s just how much I was interested in its contents.

The contents of the book were exceedingly simple. The whole novel was just about a Witch, Fran, walking around, sightseeing in different countries. The personality of the main character somehow feels identical to that of my teacher.

“Witch-san! If you want to read the book, then buy it.”

I was discovered by the store clerk after reading the book for a while. The store clerk approached me while using a cloth duster to dust the books, and,

“....Hmm. Hmm? Oh, you’re reading the 『The Adventures of Fran』 ?
Witch-san, you have good taste.”

“Is this book famous?”

“Well, of course. There’s no one in this country who doesn’t know about this book, it’s a wonderful bestselling novel.”

“Is it really that interesting?”

Reading this book is sending shivers down my spine, though.

However, it appears that many people in this country have an opinion that is the complete opposite of mine. The shop clerk nodded several times in response to my question, and,

“Of course! It’s really interesting! Witch-san, I haven’t seen you around here before. Are you perhaps a traveler? You should take some time to go sightseeing. The whole country is overflowing with 『The Adventures of Fran』 merchandise.”

“...Fumu.”

“By the way, will you be buying that?”

I replied,

“Please give me three copies. One for storage, one for advertising, and the last for my own enjoyment.”

I walked around and did some sightseeing while carrying the three books that I had just purchased, and it was just as the shop clerk from the bookstore had said.

The city was full of merchandise related to the Witch Fran.

There was a bronze statue that looked pretty similar to my teacher, and there was a plaque that had 『A bronze statue of the Legendary Traveler Fran』 written on it.

As for the inns, there were quite a few that had signs that read 『The Legendary Traveler Fran once stayed at this inn』 . How fickle were you when it came to picking an inn, Fran-sensei?

“.....”

However, why was she being called a legendary traveler?

When I asked that question to the people I met while walking on the road, an interesting fact came to light.

“Eh? You’re asking why the Witch Fran is so popular?”

“Around ten years ago, the King of this country purchased a bag from a merchant that apparently belonged to the Legendary Traveler.”

“When he looked inside the bag, he found the manuscript for a novel inside. Incredibly, that was apparently a novel written by the Legendary Traveler herself!”

“The king was deeply moved after reading it. That’s why he decided to publish and sell that book within the country as a novel written by the Legendary Traveler.”

“We read it as well and found it to be so interesting—really, there’s not a single person in this country who doesn’t know about the Witch Fran.”

That’s what I heard.

.....

“Umm, so the Witch Fran is the Legendary Traveler?”

I asked that question to all the people I talked with, but they all gave me the same response.

“Of course!”

The Legendary Traveler that the merchant mentioned is probably different from the Legendary Traveler that the people in this country talk about.

Even though 『The Adventures of Fran』 doesn't really have that much value....

Well, I don't really need to go out of my way to dispute the fact.

As my teacher said, the value of something changes depending on the person.

“...In any case, I managed to buy something good.”

I rented a single person room at an inn that the Witch Fran apparently loved, and opened the book.

The next time I meet Fran-sensei, I feel like I will be able to tell her a very interesting tale of my travels. I had a small smile on my face as I thought about that.

Chapter 11: Those Who Hunt the Lazy People

It was on a certain peaceful day.

I was staying in a perfectly ordinary town, sitting at a table outside a cafe that faced the main street with an abundance of free time.

“...Fuu.”

I took a sip of my cafe au lait, and sighed as I put down my cup.

I’m not dressed as a witch today. I’m taking a break from traveling, and taking a break from being a witch as well. I’m wearing a navy blue sweater and a white flared skirt, and in this relatively plain outfit, I mingled with the people in the streets.

“.....”

I opened my newspaper.

It looks like this country is extremely peaceful.

『An old man lost his dentures.』 『Beware of the pervert who wears women’s underwear on his head.』 『An escalation in the number of young people taking a break from work.』 『How do you cure people of laziness!?’』

Such mundane things were being written in the newspapers, after all. They have no wars to win, and no issues to speak about either.

So basically, it’s a very peaceful and boring place. You could say it’s an ideal place for taking a break.

I stretched out my hand towards my cup once again.

“...Huh?”

However, in the next instant, both the cup and the table had vanished from my field of vision.

More like, they were blown away.

They were cleanly wiped away by something that came flying out of the shop with a loud sound.

“.....Eeeh.”

Looking in the direction that my cafe au lait had disappeared in, I saw a young man covered in blood lying on the debris of broken tables and chairs, and saw that the contents of my cup had splashed all over him.

Oh, my cafe au lait. You have died a pitiful death.

“Skipping work to play around with women, you’ve got some nerve! Don’t look down on work!”

A boorish man came out of the shop while saying that, grabbed the young man by the nape of his neck, and proceeded to pick him up and shake him.

The young man began to speak while his blood continued to flow.

“P-Please! Please forgive me! It was a date with my girlfriend, celebrating our one month anniversary!”

“No way. I’m not letting you off the hook. All people who skip work will be judged by us regardless of their circumstances, that is the law of this country.”

Saying that, the man began walking.

“Hiiiiiiiiiiii! P-Please stop.....!”

He dragged the wailing youth outside the cafe, towards the main street.

“.....”

Oh, what’s this? I haven’t received an apology for the honorable death of my cafe au lait yet.

I had no intention of doing anything traveler-like or witch-like today, but I couldn't just stand around and watch as a man ruined something that I had purchased and then proceeded to depart without so much as a by your leave.

I folded my newspaper and stood up.

I looked around for a stone, picked it up, and,

“Ei.”

I hurled it at him.

The palm-sized stone went flying straight towards the back of the boorish man's head.

And connected with the target beautifully.

“Ouch!!”

The man stumbled exaggeratedly and then spun around with a demonic look on his face.

“Oi, which bastard threw a stone at meeee!?”

Who, indeed?

“It was me. What about it?”

Once he heard that, the boorish man started to walk back towards me while still dragging the youth.

“Oh? You've got some guts, picking a fight with me—hmm?”

All of a sudden, he lost his bluster and came to a halt.

“.....?”

I felt confused at the man's inexplicable behaviour.

The man continued to just stand there and look at me for a while. He seemed to regain his senses after the wind blew and someone could be heard screaming at the disastrous scene that had occurred at the cafe.

“....Ha. That’s no good, I blacked out for a bit there.”

Maybe he got hit in a bad place, he looked pretty agitated.

“Hey, don’t get cocky just because you’re a little cute. Don’t you know who I am?”

“No, I don’t. Who are you?”

“.....”

“Who are you?”

I asked him once more.

The boorish man purposefully cleared his throat, and,

“I am Rogred, from the Sabotage Investigation Bureau. Interfering with my work carries a heavy price.”

“I see. Thank you for the polite introduction... By the way, do you know how heavy the price is for wasting my cafe au lait?”

“Cafe au lait?”

“That’s right.”

By the way, what exactly is the Sabotage Investigation Bureau? I’m curious.

“My cafe au lait ended up being drunk by that young man’s clothes as a result of your rampage. Please take responsibility.”

“.....”

That person called Rogred looked between me and the young man several times before saying,

“That’s not my problem. Just recover the costs from this guy.”

Saying that, he spat upon the ground. Disgusting.

“No, things wouldn’t have come to such a state if you hadn’t gone on a rampage.”

“It’s his fault for making me go on a rampage—”

“No, it’s your fault for going overboard.”

“.....”

“That being the case, please properly take responsibility.”

After I glared at him, the man gave a small laugh and said,

“...Fine. I’ll pay. It’s been three years since I started working at the Sabotage Investigation Bureau, so I make a decent amount of money. I have more than enough money to buy that for you.”

I didn’t understand why he started talking about himself all of a sudden, but unfortunately, his proposal was a little different from what I wanted. I shook my head and said,

“No, I don’t want you to reimburse me.”

I rejected his proposal.

And then, I made a proposal of my own.

“Would you mind telling me more about this Sabotage Investigation Bureau? If you will, we can consider this matter as settled.”

“...?”

His expression told me that he was wondering what kind of nonsense I was talking about.

“Is that okay with you?”

I said those words as if delivering the final blow, and the man hesitantly nodded.

It looks like the negotiations have concluded successfully.

By the time I realised it, my tedious, yet wonderfully peaceful holiday had gone missing.

After returning the exterior of the shop to its original appearance and ordering a new cafe au lait, I sat down at a table outside the shop.

Sitting across from me was Rogred-san from the Sabotage Investigation Bureau. As for the young man who was dragged around earlier, Rogred-san apparently gave him over to the custody of another investigator.

Seriously, just how big is this Sabotage Investigation Bureau?

“I see. You’re a traveler. In that case, I can understand why you don’t know anything about my job—by the way, would you mind telling me your name?”

“It’s Elaina.”

“Elaina, huh? That’s a nice name—Do you have some free time now, Elaina?”

No honorifics right off the bat, huh?

“Yes, I’m free.”

“How about tomorrow?”

“I’ll probably be free tomorrow as well.”

“I see. In that case... You want to know more about my job, right? Would you like to tag along and see my workplace?”

“Sure, that’s fine with me.”

Although I think I would be satisfied with a simple description.

“Come now, don’t be like that. If you want to know more about our work, tagging along with me would be the easiest way to understand. It’s pretty complicated work, after all...”

“.....”

While his words sounded vaguely hypocritical, I agreed that it would probably be more efficient that way. It also sounds a little interesting.

...Fumu.

“Sure, I don’t mind... But before that, please tell me what kind of work you do in detail.”

“Hell yeah! Of course!”

After raising his fist towards the sky, he went over the details of the Sabotage Investigation Bureau in great detail.

The Sabotage Investigation Bureau is...

As the name suggests, it’s an organization that investigates acts of sabotage, and is unique to this country. They monitor the attendance of people working in offices and stores, looking for people who seem suspicious and bringing them to light. Such unfortunate people will apparently receive a heavy punishment from their workplace.

By doing this, they can put a stop to acts of sabotage by young people, or so the adults reasoned. There was even an article in the newspaper about

『Young people taking a break from work』 which complained about people skipping work. Are the people in this country really that unprofessional? Is this because they are accustomed to peace?

“—So basically, our activities keep the people from slacking off.”

“I see. So you’re basically an agent of the country, sent to correct the people’s attitude towards work?”

“Putting it simply, that’s about it.”

“Fumu fumu.”

“Incidentally, we’re backed by the country so we don’t get in trouble no matter how much we go on a rampage. I’ve never lost a fight in my life, so this job is perfect for me. No matter what I do, it’s justified.”

Again, why is he talking about himself? While I was growing fed up with him, Rogred-san finished his cafe au lait, and,

“Well then—we should be on our way.”

“Where are we going?”

After giving me a smile and trying to look cool, he replied,

“A place where you can watch me work, of course.”

I felt that reacting would be too troublesome, so I just took a sip of my warm cafe au lait.

○

Starting that afternoon, I stayed close to him as he went about his work.

The first place he took me to was a certain furniture store. The interior of the store was filled with the scent of wood, and the middle-aged man there spoke to us while he was assembling a bookshelf.

“That’s right. It’s very troublesome, Investigator-san. This week, his little sister apparently passed away.”

Apparently, a young man who had been an apprentice at the furniture store under the middle-aged man for three months had stopped coming in to work.

“‘This week?’ Has something similar happened before?”

I was not an investigator, but I joined their conversation because I felt curious.

The middle-aged man nodded.

“Yeah. Last week, it was his father who passed away.”

“Oh?”

“Incidentally, his mother passed away the week before that.”

“.....”

“And the week before that, it was his uncle.”

“.....”

“And the week before that—”

“Ah, that’s enough.”

I stopped him because I didn’t know how far back this went.

In any case, I understood that if this wasn’t a suspicious situation, then nothing was. After that, Rogred-san asked the store manager for some details, and we left the store.

“Still, this has turned into an interesting situation. Do you think that apprentice is under a curse that causes one member of his family to die each week?”

“That’s why he came to our attention. Still, we have to determine if this actually true—although I’m fairly certain that he’s just ditching work.”

“Agreed.”

After that, we headed towards the young man’s house, and discovered a young man in that neighborhood who was idly watching birds. Rogred-san apprehended him immediately.

By the way, we did some interrogation and found that not a single person from his family had died. His parents and grandparents are still very much alive. Incidentally, he was an only child. So apparently, his little sister never existed in the first place. Is he really willing to go to such lengths to avoid work?

An escalation in the number of young people taking a break from work, indeed.

I continued to watch Rogred-san at his work for a few days after that. The excuses made by young people to avoid their work were fairly horrible. I

couldn't even bear to look at them any more. Just what is driving them to go so far?

The first person we visited was a man who worked at a library. He had disappeared a week ago with no contact afterward, so we had to pay him a visit.

"A week ago, you say? Ah, I took the day off because it was raining. And I continued to take time off from work after that for one reason or another."

The man responded to our call and said that with a straight face.

While obviously irritated by the man's attitude, Rogred-san attempted to bring the matter to a close.

"So you're going back to work starting today, right?"

"Of course... Ah, I'm sorry. The wind is blowing strongly today so I'll be taking the day off."

"Oi."

Obviously, he was arrested.

The next person we encountered was a young woman who worked at an inn. Her workplace was not able to get in touch with her since three days ago.

"That's wrong. I haven't been ditching work for the past three days. It's just that I've been helping people out for the past three days, so I couldn't go to work even though I wanted to."

"That doesn't explain why you're not at work today."

"Ah, I plan to help people out today as well."

"....."

Shouldn't she be helping the people at her workplace instead?

The third person was a man who worked at the grocery store. He had been taking many days off work for the past few months, but this time he finally earned the achievement of being absent for a whole week in a row.

His excuse was as follows.

“I didn’t feel like working, so I took some time off.”

“.....” “.....”

In that case, why not just quit?

In any case, the people of the Sabotage Investigation Bureau apparently handled cases like this.

Watching Rogred-san at his work was a difficult experience, but when he said that we would be going to check up on a teacher who had started ditching work recently, I stopped going along.

I thought that I had had enough. At this rate, I felt like I would end up stuck doing this forever.

To be honest, I was just tired of being led around so much during my holiday time.

○

A few days later.

I was sitting at a table outside the cafe that faced the main street, pointlessly passing the time by reading the book of which I had purchased three copies in a certain country, while blowing on and drinking my steaming cafe au lait.

However, my peaceful alone time was not fated to last long.

“Yo. So this is where you were.”

Saying that, Rogred-san pulled up the chair opposite mine and sat down without permission.

“Hello.”

He would occasionally come to invite me to watch his work even after I told him that I was going to stop. It's a little annoying.

"Are you sure you don't want to come along today?"

"Yes. I don't really care anymore."

"Hmm."

He grunted and furrowed his eyebrows as if he disapproved.

"...In that case, Elaina, do you have some free time right now?"

"Yes, I do."

"I see, you have free time."

"Yes."

"You're free right now, huh?"

"That's what I just said."

I'm reading a book right now because I have some free time. I'm reading a book, so I'd rather not get caught up in some other work.

If he asked me out on a date or something, I was ready to curtly refuse him, but,

"In that case, do you want to go somewhere with me and have fun—"

However, his words were cut off before he finished his sentence. They were cleanly wiped away along with a loud sound.

I looked up from my book in surprise, but he had disappeared. Actually, the table had disappeared from my field of vision as well, along with everything on it.

More like, they were blown away.

After glancing to the side, I saw Rogred-san covered in blood lying on the debris of broken tables and chairs, and saw that the contents of my cup had splashed all over him.

Oh, my cafe au lait. You have died a pitiful death once again.

“You bastard! Skipping work to play around with women while being an officer of the Sabotage Investigation Bureau, you’ve got some nerve! You said that you were taking the day off because you had a high fever!”

While I was lamenting my loss, someone was jeering at Rogred-san.

“N-No! I was going to go to the hospital right away. I wasn’t ditching work!”

Oh? I feel like I’ve seen this exchange somewhere before.

“Don’t lie to me, brat! What kind of man would take his girlfriend to the hospital on a date after having a nice lunch at a cafe!?”

“Ah, I’m not his girlfriend.”

He must have misunderstood.

“...Having lunch at a cafe with a friend who is not your girlfriend—”

“We’re not friends either.”

“.....”

“We’re just acquaintances.”

“What kind of man would go to the hospital after having lunch with a mere acquaintance?”

Saying that, the large man grabbed Rogred-san by the collar and said,

“Anyways, I’m taking you in. Understood?”

Saying that, he started walking away while dragging him along.

“D-Damn it...! Let me go! Let me gooooo!!”

He dragged Rogred-san from outside the cafe, towards the main street.

“.....”

Oh, what’s this? Once again, I haven’t received an apology for the honorable death of my cafe au lait.

I closed my book after marking my page with a bookmark, and stood up.

I looked around for a stone, picked it up, and,

“Ei.”

I hurled it at him.

The palm-sized stone went flying straight towards the back of the large man’s head.

And connected with the target beautifully.

“Ouch!!”

The man stumbled exaggeratedly and then spun around with a demonic look on his face.

“Oi, which bastard threw a stone at meeee!?”

Of course, the answer was,

“It was me. What about it?”

Once he heard that, the large man started to walk back towards me while still dragging Rogred-san.

“Oh? You’ve got some guts, picking a fight with me—hmm?”

All of a sudden, he lost his bluster and came to a halt.

“.....?”

I felt confused at the man’s inexplicable behaviour.

The man continued to just stand there and look at me for a while. He seemed to regain his senses after the wind blew and someone could be heard screaming “Not again!” at the disastrous scene that had occurred at the cafe.

In a way quite different from the time with Rogred-san.

Actually, maybe it wasn't that different after all.

“So—so beautiful...!”

○

The Sabotage Investigation Bureau was a state-funded organization meant to keep young people from ditching work, but by the time I left that country, that organization had to temporarily cease their activities.

What on earth happened there? I heard that a number of investigators (mainly men) started to ditch their own work one after the other, and they had to be taken into custody.

This situation of going out for wool and coming home shorn incited the populace of that country which previously had no wars to win and no issues to talk about, and I heard that the entire Sabotage Investigation Bureau received a lot of criticism.

Incidentally, the male investigators who received severe punishment for forgetting their station all said the same thing.

“I was tricked by a beautiful woman. I regret nothing.”

Apparently, they said something meaningless like that in their testimonies.

Ah, beauty is truly a sin.

Anyways, I hope they find a better way of dealing with people who ditch work. I can only hope that the adults can properly talk to each other and make calm decisions until the Investigation Bureau starts working again.

If not, they might be led astray by some witch with bad intentions next time.

Chapter 12: Paradise of the Resurrected Dead

I was flying over the plains with the feeling of gentle sunlight upon my skin.

I flew along the undulating terrain, passing by the flowering plants.

The wind had a hint of warmth, and it felt like it was enveloping me as I flew on my broom. It was such a comfortable feeling that I felt like I might nod off.

Looking further ahead, I saw a country before me.

Ever since I found out that this place exists, it has been my dream to visit there some day. And now, that place is within sight.

It's a small country surrounded by high walls. I can't see the inside of the country properly from here.

However, I have a feeling that it is going to be a lot of fun. The wall surrounding the country shows decoration different from that of the other countries.

Well, I call it "decoration," but it's basically just words written on the walls in large script.

"...Oh?"

This is what was written.

『This country has been taken over by dead people. Do not enter.』

My, they certainly know how to build the right atmosphere.

I finally arrived at the gates, but they were closed. They don't respond even when a guest arrives? This is troublesome. How am I supposed to enter?

The large gate didn't make much of a sound when I knocked on it, only a weak one.

.....

Oh, I see. So that's how it is. The setting is that the country was taken over by dead people—so of course the main gates won't open. Are there any entrances apart from here?

I wandered around near the gate for a bit.

“Hmm...?”

And found it quite easily.

There was a small door to the side of the main gate. It was a regular-sized door, the size you'd expect to see on a normal house.

“.....”

I noticed that there was a sign posted on that door when I made to open it.

“This place has been fully taken over by dead people. Please do not enter.”

That was written in bad handwriting, and below that:

“However, there might be some people who are still alive besides us. If you are a strong and brave person, please enter and save the people inside.”

That was written there too.

By the way, there was a sign saying 『OPEN』 hanging from the doorknob.

“Hoho...”

Wow, they've really put some effort into this. Just as I expected. They know just how to make it feel authentic.

I opened the door without any hesitation.

I am both brave and strong, after all.

○

This place, called “Paradise of the Dead,” was a strange country.

I've heard that this is a wonderful and bizarre country that uses monsters known as ghouls as an attraction to entertain tourists. It appears to be fairly

famous in this region, and when I asked people “Are there any interesting countries nearby?” one in three people recommended this place to me.

This place sounded so interesting that I came here without asking for more details, but it’s overflowing with a very interesting atmosphere.

Not only did they have a plan in place to entertain visitors even before they passed through the gate, the sights inside the country were also equally entertaining.

Most of the buildings were partially destroyed and covered in ivy. The main road that stretched out from the gate was littered with rubble from the fallen buildings, and weeds were poking from between the pieces of rubble.

It looks like this place has been like this for quite a while.

“...Hoho.”

Like I said, the area immediately inside the gate was in a horrible state of disrepair, but it truly made for a great atmosphere. It makes me think that ghouls might show up at any time. I would like to take my hat off to the person who came up with the idea of turning an entire country into a place of recreation.

I slowly drifted through the country while riding on my broom.

Most likely, this country had been allowed to come to such a state on purpose. I looked about in admiration while flying past a large pool of water that had formed in a large depression in the street.

And that’s when it happened.

“Aaaaaaaah....!”

Something jumped around the corner of the street while screaming.

“Uwaaah!”

I was unable to stop or avoid it in time, and my broom came to an abrupt halt while making a dirty, squishing sound.

It looks like I scored a clean hit.

I was thrown off the broom, and after fixing my posture as I flew through the air, I landed right in the pool of water. I was soaked from the knees down. Horrible. This is the worst.

I was angry. I was *really* angry.

“Hey! What’s the big idea, jumping out all of a sudden—”

However, when I turned around, I saw something even more horrible, impaled by the handle of my broom.

“...Uwah.”

Right in front of me, my broom was drifting in the pool of water. And beside it was something that looked like a person.

It was a man, and the handle of my broom had pierced his temple. He was holding a sword in each hand, for some reason he was naked above the waist (with plenty of muscles), and overall he gave off a dangerous air, but he was currently lying facedown in the puddle.

Dead. With the handle of my broom still stuck in him.

“...Umm.”

I hesitantly approached that man and touched his shoulder.

And then,

“Uuuu...”

He turned his face that was noticeably ruined by decomposition towards me, and started to make some noise. One of the eye sockets was empty, and drool was leaking out of his mouth.

Oh, it’s just a ghoul.

“Are you okay?”

“Aahhh...”

Looks like he’s fine. In that case, I should hurry and move on ahead.

I put a foot on the ghoul’s shoulder and tried to pull my broom out. I can’t go on ahead without it, after all.

“Aaaah.....”

However, I wasn’t able to pull it out. Each time I pulled on the broom, it just created more ripples in the water along with the ghoul’s head.

“Hnnnnnnnn...!”

I pulled even harder.

And then, finally, the broom responded to my efforts and slipped free. Yay, I managed to pull it out!

“...Ugh.”

Nope, I didn’t manage to pull it out after all.

The head of the ghoul was still attached near the tip of my broom handle.

Apparently, it was his head which was pulled free from his body instead.

Looking down, I saw his body twitching near my feet after it was separated from the head.

.....

Ah, this is bad.

It looks like I’ve destroyed some property belonging to the country right off the bat. I could reattach the head with magic, but there’s no point in doing that if the head is still stuck on my broom.

Even so, the idea of removing the head from the broom by myself was somewhat repugnant. I didn’t want to touch it, after all.

“.....”

In any case, I should find someone in charge and apologize...

Obviously, I didn't want to walk around while holding a broom with ghouls' heads stuck on it. So I used a piece of cloth I found lying around to wrap the head of the ghoul, and resumed flying.

By the way, the ghoul's head still kept making noises like 『Aaaah』 and 『Nuuuu』 even after it was wrapped in a cloth, so I stuffed a rock in its mouth. Actually, this made for a good counterweight at the end of the broom's handle.

“Hello... Is anyone there...?”

Unfortunately, this country had the right atmosphere, if nothing else. No one came to help me even though I flew around asking for help.

『Aaahhh...』 『Uuuu....』 『Oooh...』

What's more, even the ghouls were ignoring me. The ghouls just looked up at me as I flew overhead, but none of them even tried to chase me.

“...Ugh.”

It took some more flying around before I finally ran into another living person.

“...! Hey look! It's a witch! A witch is here!”

“Hey! Please save us!”

There were two people waving at me from the windows of a very large house. Thank goodness. I've finally managed to run into some living humans.

I can finally say goodbye to this ghoul stuck to the end of my broom! With a light heart, I made my broom fly higher and headed towards those two people.

“.....”

And then, I looked down at the garden of that large house.

“Really, they’ve put too much effort into this.”

I muttered that to myself while taking in the scene spread out below me.

There were a large number of ghouls milling about right below me. There were about a hundred of them, raising an unpleasant chorus of 『Uuu’s』 and 『Aaah’s』.

“.....”

I started to feel like breaking just one of them wasn’t really a big deal.

○

I didn’t notice it while I was looking at it from a distance, but the moment I entered the building, I was assailed by a sense of unease. The two people who had been leaning out of the window were a decidedly strange pair.

“Thanks for coming. You did well to find us here, but I suppose I should have expected nothing less from a witch.”

One of them was a girl with messy brown hair. You might think that’s pretty normal with just that description, but she had an extremely large sword hanging from her waist for some reason. She looks really cool.

“Seriously though, thanks for coming! We’ve been under siege by them for almost a week. Our stock of food was starting to get dangerously low.”

The other was a young man who was wearing armor. He looks really cool. But he stinks. I took a step back.

“Do you people work in this country?”

When I asked that, the woman nodded.

“Yes. Or rather, we *used* to work here. This country is no longer functioning as one. As you can see, it’s been overrun by ghouls.”

She gave a sigh after saying that.

Really, I don't want to hear about that setting anymore.

“If you're people from this country, then that's fine. Actually, I came here to apologize—”

“By the way, Witch-san! What's your name?”

Armor-san interrupted me in the middle of my sentence. Ugh, he really stinks.

“Ah, my name is Elaina and I am called the Witch of Ashes it's nice to meet you could you please not come any closer?”

“I see! It's nice to meet you! By the way my name is Anthony, and this is my partner Anna.”

I ignored the Armor-san who appeared to be in high spirits.

“This country has a lot of ghouls, doesn't it? Just how many are there?”

I asked in a roundabout fashion, with a light jab to accompany my apology.

“If you're talking about the ones outside, they're all real. The artificial ghouls aren't active right now.”

The brown haired girl with glasses, or Anna-san, said that.

“Umm, let's forget about your rehearsed script for now. How many are there?”

“...Well, if you're talking about the artificial ones, I'd say about fifty?”

“Hmm? Are there really only fifty? There were definitely more than a hundred ghouls outside, though.”

“Those are real ghouls.”

“Is that a part of the setting too?”

“No, I'm serious. They're really actual ghouls. We used to use crappy imitations to get by before but there was an idiot who said 『Reality is

important!』 and decided to use actual ghouls. Because of that, the ghouls started multiplying inside the city, and this is the result.”

“.....”

I want to think that the girl is lying, but for some reason I feel like she is telling the truth.

“Umm, is that part of the setting too?”

“It’s the truth.”

“...Oh, come now.”

She must be joking.

It’s a part of the setting for this place... Right?

“Unfortunately, this is the undeniable truth. If you still have doubts, go and let those ghouls outside catch you. You’ll learn the hard way whether those guys are real or fake.”

“.....”

“I’ve already said this many times, but I’m not joking.”

“.....”

“Our country has been destroyed by ghouls.”

Anna-san said that with a smile like it was of no consequence.

I couldn’t believe it.

The ghouls that I saw all over the city were all genuine? Seriously?

For starters, I threw my broom away.

○

I saw that the issues beleaguering this country were not really that complicated. To put it simply, it was something like this.

About a week ago from today, the magician living in this city said this:

“Why does this country insist on using such cheap knock-offs for business? Use the real ones, the real ones are better.”

But wouldn't using real ghouls invite disaster into our midst? How do you even catch a ghoul, anyway? The people raised such concerns, and the male magician said,

“Don't worry. I'll use an incredible technique to make the ghouls obedient.”

And laughed after saying that.

And so, the man brought a few ghouls to the country at a later date.

“See! These are real ghouls!”

The people of the country were overjoyed.

“Amazing! Magician-san is so great!”

“I see... So real ghouls actually look this disgusting...”

“Compared to this, the ghouls in our country really do look fake.”

“Using real ghouls would probably excite the customers more.”

“No objections!”

The man nodded towards the delighted people. And then he let it go to his head.

He put his hands into a ghoul's mouth, and forcibly spread it open.

“By the way, I've removed all the teeth from these ghouls. Ghouls infect living humans by biting them, right? If you do this, they can't spread any infection! So we can go ahead and use real ghouls without worrying about them attacking anyone! Besides, ghouls can stay alive forever even if you don't feed them, meaning there's no cost involved in their upkeep! What do you say, have you ever heard of a better idea than this?”

The people were once again overjoyed. They once again raised their voices in approval similar to before.

Of course, this made the man even more arrogant.

The man reached out to a ghoul, put his neck in its mouth, and laughed.

“Look! No matter what they do, it’s useless! I’m not injured! How’s that!? Isn’t that perfect!? Hahahahaha—”

And so,

『 Ahhhh 』 『 Uuuuuh 』 『 Ohhhh 』

This country was overrun by ghouls. And they lived happily ever after.

If you’re wondering what exactly happened, the male magician thought that the toothless ghouls were harmless, but that was apparently not the case and they were actually able to spread the infection. Just coming into contact with their saliva was more than enough.

No matter how perfect it seems, all plans have a chance of failure—or so Anna-san concluded.

“...So can I just assume that all the people involved were idiots?”

That was all I could say after hearing that. Anna-san replied,

“Your interpretation is mistaken, because I am not an idiot.”

“...Putting that aside, what you’re saying is that the two of you barely managed to escape with your lives and now you’re the only ones left?”

“That interpretation is mistaken as well, because we are not the only two people left alive.”

“What do you mean?”

Seeing me tilt my head in confusion, Anna-san explained.

“From what we’ve been able to see from here, there are around a hundred people still alive. Take a look out of the window. You should be able to see the messages written by the people who are still alive.”

Saying that, she gestured towards the broken window behind me.

Looking around, I saw a beautiful sky spread out before me.

“Wow, such nice weather... Fumu.”

Looking down over the devastated scenery of the city, I understood what she meant.

I didn’t notice them while I was flying overhead, but I now saw various signs posted all over the city with things like 『Please help!』 『I’m still alive』 and 『There’s a child here. Requesting aid.』 written on them.

“The day the magician brought the real ghouls to the city, we accepted visitors as usual. Meaning the visitors who entered the city that day also turned into ghouls.”

“I see.”

“We want to go around to those signs and save the people while they are still alive, but...”

“...That looks like it would be pretty difficult.”

I looked downward. My eyes met the stares of an innumerable number of ghouls. Ugh.

Seeing me staring at the ghouls with a depressed expression, Anna-san let out a laugh.

“No, getting past those ghouls is actually pretty easy.”

“Getting past those numbers? How?”

While I was confused about what she meant, a heavy, clanking noise came close to us—meaning Armor-san came to join us.

“We are scholars who studied the physiology of ghouls back when this country was still functioning normally. By the way, Anna was at a pretty high position even among the other scholars, and she was even called the Ghoul Craftsman.”

“That’s all well and good, but why are you wearing armor?”

“Isn’t it cool?”

“It is.”

But it stinks.

“Right? And so, according to Anna—”

Based on what Armor-san said, Anna-san was the one who had been creating the ghouls that had been previously used in this country. She knows ghouls and their behavior inside out.

Anna-san snorted like it was no big deal and continued to speak.

“Well, I have enough samples down there to completely fill up the area around the building, so it wasn’t hard to come up with a way to counter them. And so, I made something like this.”

Saying that, she held out a small bottle towards me.

“...What is that?”

The bottle was equipped with an atomizer, and it was filled to the brim with a dark red liquid. It looks dirty. For some reason, I think it may smell very bad.

“This is a perfume that will let you avoid ghouls. They don’t eat each other, so I thought that they would ignore us if we smelled similar to them. Their sense of smell isn’t all that great, so they can’t tell the difference. This perfume is the result of that theory. If you use this perfume, the ghouls won’t attack you as long as the smell persists. It’s foolproof.”

“...Oh? That’s incredible.”

“Meaning it’s a chance to make a whole lot of money in one go. Fufufu.”

“.....”

Apparently, mental toughness and commercial spirit won’t die even though the country is destroyed. I learned that today.

I can only hope that she is not cut from the same cloth as that magician she was talking about.

“Oh? What, you don’t believe me? Don’t worry, it has already been tested. The two of us put on the perfume and walked around the city, but the ghouls didn’t react to us. I won’t make stupid mistakes like that male magician.”

.....

“In that case, why not just go around to all the places where the people are hiding and rescue them?”

“There’s one reason why that won’t work. After going out into the city, we discovered a certain troubling fact.”

Anna-san fell silent after saying that and showed a depressed expression while clutching the perfume bottle, so Armor-san picked up where she had left off.

“The magician who brought the ghouls into the city is now a ghoul himself, and he’s crazy strong.”

“...What do you mean?”

“It appears to a mutation of some sort, but he’s just insanely strong. What’s more, the perfume doesn’t work on him. Even if we hide among the ghouls, he discovers us and chases us around. Goddammit!”

Armor-san stamped his feet in frustration. So noisy.

“Dammit... If we could just do something about that magician... If not for him, we could go and save everyone else...!”

Anna-san glanced at me several times while saying that. So sly.

.....

Oh? Wait a minute, are they trying to use me?

I felt a bad premonition about where this was going as Anna-san continued to speak.

“That magician’s ghoul is extremely muscular, naked above the waist for some reason, and what’s more it wields a sword in each hand. We tried to fight back in the same way and took up swords as well, but we were no match for it. If only we had someone who could snipe it from a distance. We’d be able to win easily. Then we can go and help all those people.”

My bad premonition was right on target. Also...

“...Hmm?”

A strange coincidence seems to have occurred. Oh, my.

Hmm? Extremely muscular? Naked above the waist? Wields a sword in each hand?

I feel like I’ve seen something that matches that description. To be specific, it wasn’t long after I entered this country.

“...Umm.”

I half-ran over to the broom that I had thrown away earlier and unwrapped the rags that were wound around the object at its front.

“This magician you’re talking about, did he perhaps look like this?”

After being freed from the cloth, the ghoul... or rather, its head spat out the rock that had been stuffed in its mouth and greeted the other two people with a 『Nuu... Ahh...』

“.....”

“.....”

The two of them were silent for a while and looked at each other. Shortly thereafter, they exchanged a high-five with a loud sound.

“You’re the best!”

Said Anna-san.

“I get that a lot.”

By the way, I took it out in close quarters rather than from a distance.

○

Right before we left the building, Anna-san sprayed the perfume on herself and Armor-san and said,

“Okay, here’s the plan. To begin with, the two of us will go out into the city as we are wearing the perfume. Witch-san, you will guide us while flying from above. You should be able to see houses where there are people waiting for aid easily from up there, right? ”

That’s how it was.

The perfume used for keeping ghouls away smelled so bad that you’d think anyone who smelled that would run away after getting just a whiff. That’s just how incredibly stinky it was.

“Oooooooooohhhhhh!”

Incidentally, there was already a puddle of vomit around Armor-san’s feet. Ugh.

“Right. Now it’s your turn, Witch-san.”

“Ah, sorry, but I don’t need it. I have this, so I’ll be fine.”

I rejected Anna-san’s offer while showing her my broom which still had the ghoul’s head attached to it.

The rescue operations started off with such a lackadaisical feeling.

“There’s a house around that corner with a sign that says 『Help!』 By the way, there are five ghouls in the alley.”

I gave out directions in that manner and the two of them replied with an “Understood!” and went in the direction that I indicated.

Surprisingly, it looked like the effects of the perfume were quite palpable as none of the ghouls assaulted them. They just looked on as the two of them passed by, occasionally making sounds like 『Aaaa』 .

In this way, they two of them were able to rescue the people without any difficulty.

“Thank you so much! I didn’t think anyone would actually come to save us!”

“The two of you really stink.”

The people hiding in the house turned out to be a couple. Anna-san mercilessly doused the two of them with the perfume while they were embracing each other. They threw up.

The rescue operation continued in this manner.

I gave directions from the air while guiding the group of people who gave off a horrible stink, allowing them to rescue other people.

However, the people who were being rescued—no, the people who had managed to survive this long were all people with less than ideal personalities.

For example,

“Hehehe... So this is the last bottle.... Hehehe.”

There was a drunkard who was drowning himself in alcohol.

“Ugh! I’ll draw these ghouls away! The rest of you, go on ahead!”

And a man who shouted something like that all of a sudden. We’re here to rescue him, so what on earth is he saying?

“Like, I doubt these ghouls are really that tough in the first place.”

“Taking them out would be a breeze, for sure. They look like they’d be really slow.”

“Anyone who’s afraid of ghouls is a pathetic wimp.”

“Hell yeah!”

We also found a group of youngsters who were in high spirits about the whole thing. I can’t help but wonder how they managed to survive.

“She’s not here! My Madonna-chan has been missing since yesterday! Madonna-chaaaaaan!”

Oh, there was also a rich-looking old lady who was searching for her lost dog.

Such people are not only often useless, they definitely would do something unnecessary and mess things up, so I advised against taking them along with us, but in the end, we ended up taking them along.

“Oh, no~ Ghouls are so scary. I can’t stand them~”

In addition, there was a woman who spoke in such a sweet voice that I felt like my ears would rot just listening to her speak. Of course, we rescued her as well. In addition, she was sprayed with the perfume and ended up covered in vomit. Yay.

“.....”

And then.

Before long, we had already rescued several dozen people. I felt that these people who would normally be expected to have died long ago are unexpectedly resilient when the going gets tough.

Of course, not all of our rescue efforts went off without a hitch. There were some places where we were already too late.

“Hey! We’re here to... help...”

“Aaaaaah.”

“Uuuuuuu.”

Anna-san opened the door enthusiastically, but was greeted by a group of people who had already been turned into ghouls. There were about ten of them.

“Tch. This place is no good.”

Anna-san clucked her tongue in disapproval, as if she was annoyed by something.

It was around this time that she and the others started acting strange.

“...This place is no good either.”

Every time they found former citizens who had been turned into ghouls, and every time they added more people to their ranks, Anna-san and the others grew more and more haughty.

“Hey, they’ve already been turned into ghouls. Oh well, let’s just cut them down for now.”

In the end, they began to attack ghouls if they found them in houses where they were looking for survivors.

And then.

“Oraaaaaaaaaa! It’s a bunch of ghouls! Kill them! Don’t let a single one escape!”

Eventually, they turned into a violent mob.

I found myself wishing for a perfume that would keep ghoul-hunting humans away.

The few dozen survivors gathered near the gates of the city.

Anna-san stood on a pile of rubble and looked down at the assembled people.

“Once you pass through these gates, you can return to the outside world. Those who want to escape, feel free to go.”

Armor-san, who was standing beside her, also spoke out.

“The two of us intend to stay here and restore our country. We cannot allow our birthplace to stay a den of ghouls. We want to bring it back as a theme park.”

“If there are any among you who want to restore this country, then please help us. Let’s work together and bring it back as the greatest theme park ever. Those who want to help, please raise your hands.”

The people in the area were silent for a while.

And then, in that place where inhuman creatures were wandering around while uttering groans of 『Ooooh』 and 『Ahhhh』, one man eventually raised his hand.

“Hey, if we work for you, will you continue to give us that perfume?”

It was that drunkard we ran into earlier.

Anna-san nodded right away.

“Of course.”

“In that case, I’ll do it! Hehe... I’m addicted to the smell of that perfume now... I can’t live without it... Hehe...”

He seems to have gone off the deep end. Or maybe he was always like this.

After him, many other people started agreeing with Anna-san’s plan.

“I’ll help as well! I still haven’t found Madonna-chan!”

Like the rich-looking old lady who was searching for her dog, for example.

“I’ll help too~”

And the woman with the sickeningly sweet voice.



“Hell yeah!”

The group of clueless youngsters agreed as well. This group probably haven’t even thought about it. They’re just going with the flow.

In the end, all the people assembled there raised their hands and agreed to Anna-san’s plan.

“We did it, Anna! With this many people, we can return the country to how it used to be for sure!”

“Fufufu... Now all I have to do is make this plan work and restore this country, and I’ll be a billionaire... Fufufu.”

Anna-san was muttering some unpleasant things under her breath.

...She’s money-mad.

Right before I left the country, I had Anna-san take the ghoul’s head off my broom.

“So in the end, you’re the only person leaving.”

Anna-san pulled the ghoul’s head off with her bare hands, and tossed it away. The head landed near the group of clueless young people who started kicking it around as it moaned 『Ooooh』 and 『Ahhhh』 . Ugh.

“It looks like I was correct in deciding to leave by the end of today.”

“If you’d like, come back to visit us in about a month’s time. By that time, I’m sure our country will be back to how it was—no, better than it has ever been.”

“.....”

I stayed silent as I looked at the scene behind her.

At some point, all the survivors had started kicking the head around. At that point, I stopped looking.

“I might come again if I feel like it.”

In the end, I left the country without giving a precise answer about whether I would come back or not.

Well, I'll probably end up coming back at some point, though.

I had been looking forward to seeing this country for so long, and I haven't even officially entered the country yet.

○

One month later.

I followed the same path back, headed towards the same country which had those words carved into its walls, and opened the door which had an

『OPEN』 sign on it

I once again got on my broom and flew through the country, but...

How do I put this?

“Aaaaahhhh” “Ooooooh” “Uwaaaaaa” “Ahhhhhhhuu” “Oeeeeeeee”

Really, how else can I put this?

“It's all gone to hell.”

It had completely gone to hell.

Putting it another way, all the people who I saw here earlier had been turned into ghouls.

For example, Anna-san, Armor-san (I've forgotten his name), the rich-looking old lady, the clueless young people, the drunkard, and the couple.

Without exception, they had all been turned into ghouls.

“Ehhh... How did this happen?”

My jaw dropped due to amazement and my mouth remained open as I surveyed the scene. It's only been a month since I left. What exactly happened during that time?

“Aaaahhhh.....” “Oeeeeee.....” “Aaaaaaa.....” “Oeeeeee.....”

In mute astonishment, I observed the ghouls for a while. After some time, I saw the Anna-san ghoul give some of that perfume to Armor-san, and receive a notebook in return. The cover of the notebook had 『Armor Diary』 written on it in large, bold letters.

I quickly flew above them, snatched the notebook away while ignoring the Anna-san ghoul who let out a sad “Aaah” sound, and flew up into the air again. I thought that I would be able to discover what had happened in the past month if I read the diary.

“.....”

And so, I opened the diary.

xx Month- xx Day:

My armor is in perfect condition today as well. Especially the way it shines. I want to abandon my study of ghouls and dedicate my life to armor. Armor is seriously the best. I love armor.

“Ah, I don’t need to know about this.”

I skipped through the pages.

xx Month- xx Day:

Today, this country was able to take the first step towards being reborn thanks to a Witch-san. Anna is overjoyed as well. We had a party today to celebrate the upcoming revival of our country. That magician’s head really made a good ball. Also, that lady who was searching for her dog disappeared at some point. Oh well.

xx Month- xx Day:

It’s been three days since we started working to rebuild our country. Everyone is very enthusiastic about this. Anna is caught up in her research, and I’m extremely busy with designing attractions for the

theme park as well. Everyone else is doing whatever they can as well. That lady is still missing, but I guess it doesn't matter.

xx Month- xx Day:

The lady who was searching for her dog came back as a ghoul. The perfume probably wore off.

xx Month- xx Day:

Something horrible has happened.

The group of young people were bitten by a ghoul while they were working on building the attractions. They were not bitten by a human ghoul, but by a dog ghoul instead. What's more, the dog had a collar tag with the name "Madonna-chan" written on it.

It looks like Anna's perfume doesn't have any effect on dog ghouls. It can apparently detect the scent of humans underneath the smell of the perfume. The people who were helping us rebuild the country started to get bitten one after the other. Anna was bitten too. In fact, I'm the only one left. This is the worst.

Incidentally, I'm still safe because I was wearing armor. The dog ghoul tried to bite me, but its teeth couldn't pierce the armor. Thank god I was wearing my armor.

In any case, I'll make my escape tomorrow morning. I'm too sleepy... right now...

xx Month- xx Day:

I was attacked in my sleep. I never imagined that a dog would be able to remove my helm while I was asleep. This is the worst.

xx Month- xx Day:

...Oh, crap.

The diary ended at this point.

Apparently, that's what happened. No matter how perfect it seems, all plans have a chance of failure—those were Anna-san's words.

She was convinced that making a perfume to ward away ghouls was the best idea, but it all fell apart due to a possibility she didn't think of.

“Aaaaahhhh,” “Ooooooh,” “Uwaaaaaa,” “Ahhhhhhhhuu,” “Oeeeeeeee.”

And, so.

Regarding what Anna-san had been doing earlier, it looks like she's still doing business with the other ghouls. She takes notebooks, rotten meat, and clothing from the ghouls, and gives them the perfume from a crate filled with the stuff.

It looks like the perfume is a big hit with the ghouls, and the ghouls who received the perfume were all spraying it on themselves and letting out ecstatic “Aaaaah's” while drooling.

“.....”

Apparently, her mental toughness and commercial spirit are still alive even after she died.

○

After a little while, I left the country.

I didn't do anything special, I just looked at how these people had ended up as I was leaving. In the end, I wasn't able to experience the country that I had looked forward to for so long, but I got to see something very strange instead.

In the future, this country will probably continue to exist in its corner of the world as a country for the resurrected dead.

Living people are no longer needed there, and it should remain a paradise meant for the dead alone.

And so, to allow them to live in a world of their own, I—as was my duty being one of the people involved—flipped the sign on the smaller door near the main gates of the city as I left.

I flipped the sign from 『OPEN』 to 『CLOSED』 .

Chapter 13: For the Homeland

It was a range of low, sand-colored mountains.

There were small patches of trees and vegetation on the otherwise desolate mountain range, offering a bare modicum of color. However, as the sky was overcast with gray-colored clouds, even those plants were currently hidden in shadow.

A girl was flying alone on a broom in this dreary place.

The girl was wearing a black robe, a tricorne, and a star-shaped brooch. As her attire implied, she was indeed a witch, and also a traveler. Her hair which was the same color as the clouds swayed in the sand-laden wind, and her azure eyes looked in the direction in which she was traveling.

There were no countries in sight.

However, she spotted something strange instead—just who was this girl who was gazing at this landscape that looked like the aftermath of a disaster?

Yes, it was me.

“.....”

Lying in my path was the corpse of a huge fox-like creature that looked large enough to swallow a person whole—if I remember right, it belongs to a species called the Giant Fox—and there were several men and women crowded around it.

They were climbing atop the fox that had fallen on its side, and were cutting off pieces of its sand-colored pelt. Sawing off its thick, luxurious tail. Forcing open its large mouth and cutting off the fangs. These people were attacking the corpse of the fox, without caring about the copious amount of thick, dark blood that was oozing from its corpse.

They were speaking happily, saying things like 『Today's game is a big one』 and 『We'll get a good price for this much』. They had an expression that indicated that they were filled with a sense of accomplishment.

“.....”

I slowed down my broom and stopped near them. Somehow, I just didn't feel like passing them by.

Also, there was something I wanted to confirm.

When I got off my broom, a small cloud of dust puffed up around my feet and disappeared in the wind. Those people noticed me at the same time.

“.....?”

They stopped working and looked over at me. Eventually, the man who had been using his sword to cut up the top of the fox opened his mouth to speak.

“Hey. What is it, do you have something to say to us?”

I did not detect any hostility or suspicion in his words. I was slightly relieved.

I took a breath and spoke in a loud voice so that all of the people could hear me.

“Umm, I was hoping someone could give me directions.”

“I see, so you're lost. Did you run away from home or something?”

“I'm a traveler.”

“Oh? So, are you lost?”

“...Well, yes.”

I didn't want to admit it, but I had no idea where I was. Even when the weather is clear, you can't see very far ahead in this mountainous terrain. What's more, there weren't a lot of countries in this place as there wasn't a lot of water. It looks like it would be hard to live here, after all. For this reason, the countries in arid regions are often far away from each other.

You might even have to camp out for several days before you reached the next country. There's also a chance that you might lose your sense of direction and end up flying to some strange place. That was something I wanted to avoid at all costs, so I stopped here to interrupt these people in the middle of their hunt.

The man on top of the Giant Fox said,

“Haha! I see. Sorry Witch-san, but we don't know much about this area either. We're not from around here.”

After saying such words that threatened to make me fall into depression,

“But I know where the nearest country from here is. I'll tell you.”

He laughed while saying that.

It was a wonderful smile, but as his face, sword, and clothes were all covered in blood, it made for a strangely repulsive picture.

Ugh.

○

A lady who had shoved her hands into the Giant Fox's mouth was the one who told me where the nearest country was. She was a beautiful woman with dark brown skin and elegant black hair.

“Umm, to begin with, we're right about here—”

Her finger traced along my map that I had unfolded on top of a convenient rock lying nearby.

Maybe because she had had her hands in a corpse's mouth until just a little while ago, she was giving off an intensely bad smell. There are flies gathering around her, is this person really okay like this?

“And so, the country closest to where we are right now is this one.”

Saying that, she pressed her finger on a spot on the map.

“Oh.”

I urged her to continue while breathing through my mouth.

“I don’t know how fast your broom can go, but a horse-drawn carriage takes about one day to get there.”

“Oh?”

Ah, so I can get there in a few hours. Thank goodness.

“There aren’t any mountains between here and that country, so you can just keep moving in a straight line until you get there, like this.”

Her finger traced a path on the map.

“Hee...”

“...You’ve been breathing roughly from some time, are you okay?”

“It’s nothing to worry about.”

I nodded to her.

“So which way should I go from here?”

After comparing the map to the surroundings several times,

“Umm... Ah, it’s this way. This way should be correct.”

She smiled at me while pointing in a particular direction.

Well, that’s that. In such a simple manner, I was no longer lost.

“Thank you very much. Now I can get to the next country by the end of the day.”

“Oh, it’s fine. There’s no reason to hold back when helping someone with something as simple as directions.”

The intense smell and cloud of flies around her mixed in with my impression of her as a good person to create a rather chaotic impression overall. Behind her, her friends had returned to their work.

They were cutting off its pelt and carrying it off, and removing its tail.

“What are they—I mean, what are all of you doing?”

“Hmm? We’re hunting.”

Her tone sounded like she wanted to ask “Can’t you tell by looking?”

“That’s a Giant Fox, isn’t it?”

“Yes. Have you seen one before?”

“Well, I haven’t seen one that was alive.”

Although, since they are said to be savage enough to attack and eat humans, I’d heard about them before.

“The fur and fangs from a Giant Fox sell for a lot of money. That’s why we came all the way to this land to hunt.”

“Oh, I see.”

“We’re going to take the money back to our hometown to help the people there.”

“.....?”

I was confused at the sudden change in topic, and the lady explained their circumstances to me.

According to what she said, their homeland was being ravaged by the spread of disease, and they had come here as travelers to try and help the people back at home. They were hunting Giant Foxes and selling their fur and fangs in the large countries nearby to earn the money needed to buy medicine to cure the epidemic in their homeland.

As they carried out their hunting and got rid of the Giant Foxes that were menacing the area, rumors of their exploits traveled like wildfire to all the nearby countries, and soon enough, they were receiving commissions from those countries to wipe out the Giant Foxes in the area.

In any case, in the three months since they had left their homeland, these people had amassed a considerable amount of wealth. The lady told me this with a proud look on her face.

She also told me that she couldn't wait to use the money that they had earned to help their friends who were suffering back home.

The lady went to cart that was waiting nearby, brought back a pouch, and placed it on my hand. I could feel that it was fairly heavy.

Looking inside, I saw that it was packed full of some powder. It's probably some kind of medicine.

"This is the medicine."

I was right.

"By the way, Witch-san... I'm not asking you to return the favor for giving you directions, but would you be willing to do something for me while you continue to travel?"

I tilted my head.

"If your travels bring you to our village at some point, would you be willing to deliver this to the head of our village? We need to stay here and continue to hunt for some time yet."

"Are you really okay with handing this over to a traveler like me?"

"You don't look like a bad person, after all."

"...You're too trusting."

Well, it's not like I'd steal it or anything. It's of no use to me.

What's more, she was kind enough to give me directions, so there's that as well.

"Can you tell me where that country is?"

Hearing me say that, the lady was overly happy.

“Thank you! That would really help a lot! Let’s see, our country is—”

Saying that, she looked down at the map again.

After several seconds,

She frowned with her finger moving around a particular spot on the map.

“Hmm? It’s not drawn on the map. It’s supposed to be around here somewhere—”

Her finger was pointing to a place near the edge of the map.

That was a place that I had visited once before.

.....

“I’m sorry. I can’t go in that direction. After I reach the nearest country, I plan to keep traveling in the direction opposite to the direction in which your home country lies.”

I said that while putting on a calm expression.

“I see...”

“I’m sorry, Even though you were kind enough to give me directions...”

“You don’t need to worry about that—I’m the one who should apologize. I acted too rudely.”

“.....”

I returned the pouch with the medicine to the lady while she had a crestfallen expression on her face. The heavy feeling of the purse disappeared from my hands.

“.....”

After spending a few moments unsure of what I should say to her,

“I hope that you manage to get back to your hometown safely.”

I blurted out something foolish. I could only say something bland like this.

“Thank you. You’re kind.”

The lady gave me a sad smile.

Seeing her expression, I felt a terrible pain in my heart.

○

Regarding the place that the lady had indicated, I had been there once before.

It was about two months ago. This happened before I obtained my map of this region.

“.....”

It wasn’t a case of their hometown not being drawn on the map due to an oversight. That country no longer existed in that place.

When I happened across that place two months ago, what I found there was a large number of corpses. There were several dead Giant Foxes, soldiers, and civilians, and their bodies were all piled up like a mountain of refuse. There were bodies of people who looked like they were merely lying still with their eyes open, while others had been partially eaten and their insides were spilling out. Some of the bodies couldn’t even be considered human, and just looked like a mass of some unidentifiable substance. There were countless such corpses scattered around.

The scene was so gruesome that I wanted to cover my eyes.

However, there were still some people alive there. At one place that used to be a village, a bunch of people had gathered around the body of a Giant Fox, just like the people I met earlier.

Just what were they doing?

The men who had gathered around the Giant Fox told me.

“We are soldiers dispatched from the neighboring countries. We had received word that this area was infested with Giant Foxes, so we were sent to deal with it.”

“By the time we got the information, it was already too late for this village. As you can see, the villagers are all dead.”

“Some idiots somewhere have driven all the Giant Foxes out of their country—Giant Foxes are not native to this region.”

“Even our country is facing problems thanks to those idiots. It’s really deplorable.”

“According to some merchants I met, there is a group of people somewhere who are going around killing every Giant Fox they can find. That overhunting is probably the cause of this mess.”

“The damage won’t stop here. After being chased out of the deserts, the Giant Foxes are slowly destroying this region. It’s only a matter of time before our country is attacked as well.”

After that, one of the soldiers begged me for a favour.

“Witch-san, if you come across those people who are hunting Giant Foxes during your travels, would you please let us know? I can’t be at peace until I kill those idiots.”

The man was almost clinging to me when he asked that, and I nodded to him. Back then, I still didn’t know about the lady and her friends, or their circumstances.

○

I got back on my broom and resumed flying while creating a small cloud of dust.

I followed the directions as were given by the lady out of the kindness of her heart. The next country should come into view soon.

The landscape is still as dreary as ever and there are no signs of a country anywhere nearby. However, as long as it has not fallen into ruin, there must be people living there.

.....

In the end, I wasn't able to fulfill the wishes of either side. The wish of the soldiers who were troubled due to their villages being attacked by Giant Foxes, and the wish of the lady and her friends who were going around hunting dangerous animals for the sake of their homeland. I wasn't able to grant either of them.

I just averted my gaze from the terribly sad events and cruel reality.

No one involved in this incident came out of it being happy, and no one would be happy in the future either. The reality of this situation was far too fruitless.

However, I was incapable of doing anything about it.

No matter how much they struggle, the only thing waiting for them is despair.

Such a sad turn of events.

“.....I'm sorry.”

Those words I whispered were not meant for anyone in particular. They dissolved into the sand beneath the extremely clear sky, and vanished.

Chapter 14: The Dilapidated Country and Cat God-sama's Rebirth

I was crying.

I was crying as I flew on my broom along the main street of a dilapidated city that was still teeming with people in the afternoon. The oncoming wind blew the teardrops out of my eyes.

“Stop right there!”

“Don't let that witch escape! Capture her!”

“Don't let her leave this place alive!”

The people chasing me were soldiers of this country. There was also a magician among them, who was riding a broom and attempting to catch up to me. However, they were not my only enemies.

“Leave it to me!”

“Damn...! I nearly had her!”

“Don't let her get away!”

“After her! Keep up the chase!”

All the people in the street were jumping at me from the sides and front, trying to drag me off my broom.

People who had been fawning over cats until moments ago, people who had been having an animated conversation, people who were shopping, and some of them even came out of shops. Regardless of age and gender.

I dodged all their attacks.

At this point, the whole country considers me to be an enemy. They think I'm an evil person who is going to bring their country to ruin.

Unfortunately, that is the truth.

“Kuuuuuuh!”

I wiped away my tears and looked forwards. I seem to be in very bad shape compared to usual. The movement of the broom was terribly unstable, and wasn't moving forward in a straight line. I feel like I'll crash into the ground instantly if I let my guard down for even a second.

I put more strength into my right hand that was gripping the broom and forced it back on track. I focused on keeping the broom flying while avoiding the people who were trying to mob me.

The girl I was carrying in my left hand probably felt uncomfortable because of my rough flying.

"I feel sick..."

She softly uttered those words in a voice that only I could hear.

"Please try to endure it... I'm struggling to deal with it as well."

I wasn't able to breathe properly. Every time I sucked in a breath through my mouth, I felt like something hot and heavy was being poured into my lungs.

The girl looked at me with her round, blue eyes.

"Well, do your best. Look, we're almost at the gate."

After saying that, she happily made a "Nyaa," sound. And rubbed her cheek against mine.

I cried even more. Was I crying because I was happy? Or was it for some other reason? I really wonder.

"Bring Cat God-sama back!"

I could hear such voices reverberating through the street behind me. The girl—cat—that I was carrying once again said "Nyaa," as if to reject their words.

Let's go back in time for a little while. Around two entire revolutions of the hands of the clock backwards. Or one entire cycle of the sun and moon. In other words, about this time yesterday.

“Oh, so that country has some pretty strange customs.”

“Indeed.”

I was at a village that I happened across during my travels. I casually asked the people there if they knew about any interesting countries nearby, and the villagers told me about that country.

“What exactly do you mean by ‘strange customs?’”

“Apologies, Milady, but I know not the answer. Many souls have departed this place for that country, but nary a single one hath ever returned.”

“Ah, sorry, but can you please speak normally?”

“...I'm not sure what exactly makes their customs strange, either. The only thing we know for sure is that that country is a mysterious place.”

“Hoho—”

Oh, my. That certainly seems strange.

From what I heard, a few years ago this village used to attract tourists by marketing themselves with the tagline 『The village life is good!』 .

Furthermore, they earned a lot of money by getting foolish people from the city who misunderstood that life in the village would be free and peaceful, without any conflicts, to move to the village and settle down there.

However, a strange country came into existence nearby quite recently, and this village was all but forgotten.

The village sent some spies to the country to discover their secrets so that they could imitate them, but even the spies were won over by that country. The remaining villagers panicked and decided on the simple strategy of,

『 Well then, let's try and appeal our rural charm by changing the way we speak,』 and so drove their country further into obscurity.

Apparently, that's what happened.

.....

That sounds like a really interesting place. I'm really curious about just how interesting it really is.

“So, how do I get to that country?”

When I asked them that question, the villagers carefully explained the route to me in a forced, old-style manner of speaking.

Under a midday sky, I took off from the village and flew with my broom pointed to the west. I flew over the plains, crossed over a small bridge that spanned a river, and continued flying over the plains again.

The green lands seemed to infinitely stretch on , but I soon started to see a few thin conifer trees, and the landscape gradually changed from plains to a forest. At around the same time, the country came into view.

The large walls were quite faded despite the fact that this country was supposed to have been formed recently, and the ivy growing on the walls made it blend in with its surroundings.

When I flew closer while avoiding the increasing number of trees, I saw a large, iron gate that was closed. It looked like only this part had been recently refurbished as it looked brand new, and thereby stood out from the rest of the surroundings which had achieved a balance with nature.

After I landed and dismounted from my broom, a small window opened in the gate. I saw the silver-colored helm of a guard through that window.

“Who goes there?”

“I'm a traveler. I'm also a witch. My name is Elaina.”

“What business do you have in this country?”

“I heard that there was a wonderful country here, so I came to take a look. If possible, I would like to stay for a few days.”

The guard gave a small nod.

“...Very well. However, if you want to enter this country, you must answer a question.”

And then,

“Do you love cat-samas?”

He asked me that out of the blue.

“Eh, cats...?”

“Not cats. Cat-samas.”

“...What’s the difference?”

“It’s a matter of giving the appropriate respect to cat-samas. So, what’s your answer? Do you love cat-samas?”

“Umm... Well... I guess I do love them, yes.”

Although I’ve never even touched one before—I can’t say that, no matter what. Well, I do think that they look rather cute, and I have no reason to hate them so it should be fine.

“...Very well. Enter. There are no bad people who love cat-samas.”

“I-I see....”

“However, we will conduct a check of your belongings before you are allowed inside. Enter through the side gate.”

“Haaa...”

After that, I finished the procedures required to enter the country, and finally got inside.

I had no idea what I would find waiting for me inside. That's just how strange it was.

○

The streets inside the city which were being used by pedestrians were quite old.

The brick-faced buildings that faced the main street were neatly lined up, but they all had a faded color and, just like the city walls, they were covered in ivy. I was a little curious about the fact that all the doors of the houses looked like square holes that you would need to crouch down and pass through in order to enter.

The paving stones on the road were all covered in moss as well, and overall, this place gave the impression that it had been abandoned for a long time.

“.....”

After looking around for a bit, I understood why the guard at the gate asked me that question before I was allowed to enter.

This country is full of cats.

If you just lower your gaze a little, you'll see cats everywhere. Weaving in between the people, sunbathing in the middle of the road, and playing with the weeds.

Everywhere I looked, I saw more cats. It was so excessive that it could be considered strange. It would be a hellish experience for anyone who dislikes cats, so asking that question before letting someone inside makes sense.

I was thinking of such things while attracted by a pleasant wheat smell from a roadside stall.

“Ah, I would like to buy some bread. This one, this one, that one, and the one over there.”

The kind-looking man on the other other side of the stall replied with a “Sure,” and nodded. He picked up one each of the breads that I pointed to with a pair of tongs, put them in a paper bag, and handed them to me.

“Four coppers.”

“Okay.”

I paid. I got the bread. Yay.

It happened right after that.

“—Mister, I would like to buy some bread too. This one, this one, that one, and the one over there.”

At some point, another witch-san had appeared next to me and ordered the exact same breads that I had ordered. She was a grown-up lady wearing a blue robe and a tricorne.

She exchanged four coppers for a paper bag, nodded to the man, and then turned towards me. Her light blue hair was cut short at the back, and swayed slightly in the breeze. Her bangs were longer than average in contrast to her short hair at the back, so I could only see one of her eyes.

“Good morning. I haven’t seen you around before. Are you perhaps a traveler?”

I pulled one of the breads out of the paper bag, took a bite, and replied.

“Yes, that’s right. Who are you?”

“I’m a witch. Also, I live here.”

“Ho.”

“Ah, sorry for calling out to you all of a sudden. I’m the only witch in this country, and there are not many magicians here in the first place, so I just started talking to you out of curiosity. I hope I’m not bothering you.”

“Well, I was surprised when you started talking to me all of a sudden.”

She gave me a bitter smile.

“Sorry about that—by the way, have you already finished looking around this country?”

After taking another bite of bread, I shook my head.

“I just got here a few minutes ago.”

When I said that,

“I see—do you want me to give you a small tour? This is a fairly strange place by ordinary standards, so if you walk around without a guide you might get swindled out of your money or arrested for some reason.”

She suddenly proposed that.

.....

True, there are many questions I have regarding this culture that lets cats run rampant. If she’s willing to give me a tour, that’s perfect. It’s very convenient for me.

“I would like that very much. As long as you promise to not swindle me out of my money.”

“Ahaha. Don’t worry, I won’t charge you for the tour or anything. I came here from a different country as well, so I went through a lot of hardship when I first came here. This country has several unique laws, and if you break one accidentally you might be sent to prison.”

“Sent to prison...”

This is the first I’ve heard about that.

“Yes. I’ll explain things to you to keep something like that from happening.”

She said, “We might end up living together in this country in the future,” and smiled.

At that time, I still didn’t properly understand what she meant by that.

While eating our bread, we walked side by side around the city.

“I haven’t introduced myself yet, right—my name is Rushie. The Witch of Fair Skies, Rushie.”

“I’m Elaina. The Witch of Ashes.”

I slightly bowed my head in greeting, and she said “Nice to meet you, Elaina-san,” while smiling.

I responded with the same.

“Well then, let me tell you more about this country while I’m showing you around. To start with, there are three laws in this country that you must follow at all times.”

“Ho.”

“Well, I say that, but two of the laws are fairly simple and none who love cat-samas would even think of breaking those—the first law is 『Regardless of the circumstances, thou shalt not cause harm to cat-samas.』 ”

“What happens if you break that law?”

“Eh? You’ll be sent to prison, usually.”

“Isn’t that a bit harsh...”

“Any person despicable enough to harm a cat-sama deserves that, don’t you think? Also, the second law somewhat overlaps with the first... 『Thou shalt only interact with cat-samas with feelings of endless love.』 ”

“That’s pretty abstract... By the way, what happens if you break it?”

“Prison.”

“.....”

I’ve seen some bad laws, but this really takes the cake...

“Umm... So what exactly should—achoo!”

“Are you okay? Do you have a cold?”

“Excuse me. I’m fine—so, what exactly should I do when interacting with cats?”

“Well... I guess you can just interact with the cat-samas normally.”

“But does interacting with them normally satisfy the condition of showing endless love...?”

I don’t even know what’s going on anymore.

“That’s right, maybe it would be easier to understand if you see it for yourself. Let’s see—ah! Look, over there.”

While I was still perplexed, Rushie-san tugged on my sleeve and pointed at side of the road.

I saw a stall that was selling fish, and a calico cat that was intently staring at the rows of fish in the stall.

The calico cat stalked closer to the stall without attracting the attention of the shopkeeper, and rose up suddenly on its hind legs once it was directly beneath the stall. After adroitly snagging one of the fish with its claws, it popped the fish into its mouth.

“Ah!”

However, the shopkeeper spotted it just as it grabbed the fish.

The surprised calico cat glared at the shopkeeper.

Uwaah, he’s going to get angry.

Or so I thought.

“Cat-sama! Thank you for coming! Please, take as many as you would like!”

For some reason, the shopkeeper was overjoyed. What’s more, he grabbed the fish that were lying on his stall and threw them on the ground.

More cats gathered around right away, and started to fight over the fish.

.....Huh?

“What’s going on?”

“It’s love.”

“That doesn’t answer my question...”

I feel like the two of us are on different wavelengths. Are the people in this country changing the way they speak, just like those people in the village? How annoying.

“Ah, over there! Maybe you’ll find that easier to understand.”

“.....”

With her prompting, I moved my gaze.

And I was shocked speechless. This was even worse.

“Ah! Cat-sama! Cat-sama! Thank you! Thank you so much!”

There was a man lying on his back on the road with his arms and legs stretched out. He had an ecstatic expression on his face.

Atop him was a single cat. It was sitting on him with its eyes narrowed, and looked pleased as it poked at the man’s stomach with its forepaw.

“What’s that?”

“It’s love.”

“.....”

I looked away from the reality that was beyond my ability to comprehend. However, the next thing I saw was also an incomprehensible spectacle in the making.

“Arararara you’re so cute~ nyaa nyaa~”

There was a lady carrying a cat like one would carry a baby, and speaking to it in a creepy voice. Why is she talking like that?

“What is that?”

“Love, of course.”

“What exactly is ‘love’ again...”

I continued to walk around the city while feeling confused, but the more I saw—as the number of cats increased, the state of the people plummeted correspondingly.

People who took the effort to walk around cats that were lying in the middle of the street. A devilish cat that stole the main dish from the table of a couple who were having lunch in a restaurant—and the victims in question did nothing but gaze upon it with happiness. Cats that were like the incarnation of evil gathered around clothes that were for sale, climbed up on them and reduced them to shreds—and the shopkeeper and customers just watched them while smiling.

Not a single person tried to stop the rampage of the large number of cats, and they let the cats do as they pleased.

“This is what is meant by endless love.”

Rushie-san spoke proudly.

“It looks like you’re surprised, but the people of the country—no, even the people who come here from outside become that way eventually. Everyone starts to interact with the cats in a loving manner.”

“I can only see it as people losing their sense of reason and pampering the cats.”

“Well, the cat-samas of this country are especially cute compared to the ones outside. It can’t be helped if people feel like pampering them a little. You’ll understand soon enough, Elaina-san.”

“I don’t think I’ll ever understand it...”

Maybe it’s because I’ve never touched a cat?

“Actually, I don’t even see how the cats here are different from the ones outside.”

“Eh? They’re at least hundreds of times cuter than the cats you see in other countries. I originally came here for work, but I couldn’t get away from here because of how cute the cat-samas here are.”

“What kind of work?”

“Eh? I came here to spy.”

“.....”

“The people in the village where I used to live told me to come here and carefully observe the culture, and steal the ideas that could be useful as a reference.”

I feel like I’ve heard that somewhere before.

“...You say you came here to spy, but you look like you’ve settled down quite nicely here.”

“It’s fine! I’m going to go back someday! I’m just going to enjoy my life to the fullest while I’m here until that day comes!”

“...Don’t you think you’ve lost sight of your original goal? Are you really okay?”

“Does it look like I’ve lost sight of it?”

“Would I ask you that if it didn’t?”

“Ah, a kitten-sama.”

It looks like she has even lost the will to talk to me any more. As soon as she saw a kitten walking towards us with uncertain footsteps, she immediately

bent down, stretched her hand out towards it, and started making “chichichi” sounds with her tongue.

I’m not sure if the kitten reacted to that, but it managed to reach her hand.

And then, it started to gnaw on her finger. It firmly clamped its mouth around Rushie-san’s index finger and continued to gnaw at it gently.

“Ah...”

Rushie-san started at it in blank amazement for a some time, and then,

“Aaaaaaaaaaah! So cuuuuuute!”

She looked like she was about to faint. She was wriggling her body, and her breathing became rough as the kitten continued to suck her finger as if it was looking for milk.

Isn’t she enjoying this a little too much? Is this person okay?

“Ah..... Ahhhh! Haaaaaaa!”

“.....”

It looks like she’s done for.

I couldn’t help but draw away from her because of her sudden change. I felt very uncomfortable.

She had been talking normally with me until now, but now her cheeks were red as she was fawning over a kitten. Looking at this made me feel itchy, and I felt like I wanted to scratch myself all over my body.

It was so bad that I considered just leaving this place then and there.

○

“Achoo!”

I sneezed as I was walking. How many times does that make it today?

Did I perhaps catch a cold? My body also started to feel strangely heavy since a little earlier. The back of my throat feels somewhat hot as well...

In any case, let me get a good night's sleep today.

“Does this country have any good inns that are equipped with the necessary amenities?”

Rushie-san, who was in exceptionally high spirits after receiving the relentless attacks of the kitten, answered.

“Let's see... I would recommend that inn over there. It's a heavenly place where you can entangle yourself with a large number of cat-samas.”

“Maybe I asked the wrong question. Please let me know if there's an inn which provides a high standard of living.”

“What about the cat-samas?”

“I don't need any.”

“.....”

After slightly pouting as if she had found my answer to be boring, she pointed to a different building.

“In that case, that inn might be good—”

A little while later.

We continued to walk around the city as before. I had Rushie-san show me a good inn, several good restaurants that served delicious food (however, they were all filled with cats, without exception), and several other things besides.

At some point during our tour of the city, I realized that the sun was low in the sky. The sky is red.

I suppose it's time to call it a day? Just when I was able to see the end of the city tour, I remembered that there was still something I needed to learn.

“By the way, what's the third law?”

If I remember correctly, there were three laws that I had to follow at all times, right?

“Oh, I’m sorry. I had forgotten.”

“Please tell me what it is. If not, I don’t think I’ll be able to sleep at the inn in peace.”

I definitely don’t want to spend the night without sleeping while in prison.

“Ahaha. But as for the final rule, it’s pretty rare to even encounter that situation in the first place, so I don’t think it will be a problem. Let’s see, the third law is—”

It happened just as she had opened her mouth to tell me about the final rule.

The people who were walking in the streets suddenly started to make a lot of noise. The agitation spread out like a wave, and voices of admiration could be heard from here and there.

When I was looking around to try and understand what was going on, I saw that all the people were facing in one direction without exception.

And then,

“Ahh... It’s Cat God-sama!”

“Cat God-sama has graced us with her presence!”

“It’s been so many days since we last saw her.”

“She’s so beautiful...”

“She’s wonderful...!”

While saying things like that, all the people knelt down on the spot. Rushie-san was also not an exception.

“Ah... How beautiful...!”

She said that in a feverish tone while sighing, and also knelt down like the other people.

.....

.....What's going on?

There was a single cat in the direction that they were all facing. It had black, glossy fur and blue eyes.

“.....?”

However, the atmosphere around this one was somehow different compared to the other cats.

The cat that was elegantly walking towards us had two tails. I'm pretty sure normal cats don't have those. Also, its fur looked exceptionally fluffy. It might feel nice to hold.

“Rushie-san, why does that cat have two—”

“Elaina-san! What are you doing? Do the same as me, quickly!”

She didn't give me time to complete my question. As soon as I spoke, she tugged on my robe.

“.....”

She wants me to do what she's doing?

I'm supposed to kneel down and show respect to a cat?

I really don't want to do that...

But if I don't do as she says, I might be thrown in prison.

“...Uuu.”

It can't be helped.

I reluctantly got down on one knee and respectfully bowed my head like the others.

Just what am I doing in a place like this?

“...Umm, Rushie-san.”

“Be quiet. We’re in the presence of Cat God-sama. Make sure you don’t do anything to give offense.”

Eeeh....

How am I supposed to react after being told something like that all of a sudden? There should be a limit to this unreasonableness, don’t you think? I don’t even know what might cause offense to a cat. What on earth is a Cat God-sama, anyways?

I held back my words of bewilderment and annoyance in the back of my throat. It was a really bad feeling.

At the same time.

“Nyaa.”

I heard a voice. It was fairly close by. No, it was extremely close by.

“.....”

“Nyaaa~”

The black cat with two tails—the one they called Cat God-sama—had come to a stop in front of me at some point. That cat with an elegant face was looking straight at me.

“Nya.”

And then, it waved both of its tails once and suddenly jumped at me. It extended its claws and clung to my robe.

“Eeh...?”

I was confused. What exactly am I supposed to do now?

When I looked around at the other people,

“Wow....”

“To think that Cat God-sama would jump up on somebody of her own will...”

“Cat God-sama must have recognized her as somebody special.”

Voices of admiration were raised from all directions.

“I’m so jealous...”

I heard Rushie-san’s murmuring as well.

I don’t really get what’s going on, but apparently it’s not a bad thing.

Speaking of which, this is the first time I’ve touched a cat—no, it has two tails, so I’m not sure if I should be calling it a cat.

“...Ei.”

I pulled back the knee on which I was resting, sat down on the ground, and hugged the cat that was clinging to me. The cat acquiesced without struggling, and rested comfortably in my arms.

When I lightly patted its head, it looked at me with a sleepy expression and started to purr. It felt like it was saying “Pat me more.”

It really is quite cute.

I felt like I understood why the people of this country were attracted to cats so much.

Well, I still don’t feel like I love them enough to abandon all sense of reason.

“I-I-Incredible....!”

“This is...”

“I can’t believe it...!”

While I was having fun patting the one they called Cat God-sama, I heard voices raised around me once again. The people stood up and slowly walked towards me to form a circle around me and Cat God-sama.

What's going on?

When I tilted my head in confusion, from the corner of my eye I saw Rushie-san also standing up. When I turned towards her, she was looking down at me with an incredibly cold gaze.

“...I-Impossible. Elaina-san... What do you think you're doing...!”

She muttered as if she was delirious, and while speaking, she pulled out her staff.

“Eh? Umm...”

It was then that I realized that something was wrong. However, it was already too late.

“How rude!”

“How dare you pat Cat God-sama!”

“Get your dirty hands off Cat God-sama!”

“You... Do you know what what you're doing!?”

The people around me were extremely angry.

“Umm... Please, wait for a bit! Just what did I— ”

I had no idea what I had done to anger these people, and was starting to panic a little. In my agitation, I raised both my hands over my head.

The Cat God-sama whom I was carrying was suddenly tossed into the air, and landed on my lap. Landed neatly on all four legs. I felt pain as its claws dug into my thighs.

That action caused further repercussions.

“How dare you toss Cat God-sama into the air like that!”

“Not only is she rude, she did something no one who loves cat-samas would do!”

“Put her to death! Guilty!”

Rushie-san shouted loudly, in a voice that was almost a scream.

“Rushie-san, please explain to them that I was unaware of the circumstances —”

“There is no point in arguing!”

Ehh... She’s not listening...

Not only did she not explain my circumstances to the others, she hit my hands with her staff and used magic. My hands that were still raised in the air were suddenly pulled straight by an unseen force, and were bound by iron handcuffs created by her magic. What’s more, the handcuffs also came with an unnecessary feature that bound the tips of my fingers to the handcuffs so that I could not clench my fists.

I can’t hold my staff like this.

“...Umm.”

When I looked up again, I saw that Rushie-san was still extremely angry. She handed the key to my handcuffs to a soldier while glaring at me.

“Everyone! Let’s throw this rude witch into prison!”

Rushie-san shouted, and the people around us raised their voices in agreement.

“Umm... Please, just listen to me—”

“Now, stand up, Elaina-san! If you don’t, we’ll drag you there!”

Rushie-san pulled me by the handcuffs as she started to walk.

“Umm...”

“Seriously...! Only people who love cat-samas are supposed to be able to enter this country, so how did someone so rude manage to slip in?”

“.....”

Apparently, my words were not reaching her.

Still, her behaviour was somewhat strange. Compared to the time we spend walking around the city, she felt like an entirely different person.

She looks like she’s lost her ability to think calmly. Like she’s lost all sense of reason.

It was almost as if she was being manipulated by some invisible agency.

“—I finally found you.”

I felt like I heard that voice from somewhere as I was being pulled along by Rushie-san.

○

After that, I lost track of how much time had passed.

I was in a cold prison cell.

The only things I could see were the grey-colored dirty floor and walls, and the rusted iron bars of the cell. It looked like night had fallen, and I could see some faint moonlight and hear the sounds of insects through a small window in my cell.

The moon in the sky probably looks really beautiful right now—however, I am not able to see it directly. When I look upwards from my seated posture, all I can see is a stake driven into the wall, and my handcuffs that are attached to that stake. I have been sitting against the wall ever since I was brought here. I’ve lost all sense of feeling in my hands.

“Why did this happen...”

The words that slipped out of my mouth echoed sadly for a moment before fading away.

Of course, there was no one here to reply. There are no people here. I've been thrown into a prison where there aren't even any other prisoners. How can something like this be allowed? It's too much.

“.....”

No, there's no point in feeling sorry for myself. For now, let me think of how to get out of this situation.

To begin with, I once again took a look at my current situation.

As I can't bend my fingers, gripping my staff is definitely impossible. I'm chained to a wall, so even if I was able to reach my broom, I wouldn't be able to ride it. Even If I was able to ride it, I feel like I'd soon be discovered, and with my hands like this, it would be very dangerous in any event.

I can't rely on my staff. Or my broom. In short, I can't rely on magic.

Ah, this is checkmate.

Ufufu.

“...What should I do...”

I could only feel despair. It would be nice if I could resolve this situation with money. I wonder if that is possible. Maybe it depends on how the negotiations go?

More importantly, there is something else.

I should have just escaped the moment I was surrounded. Even though I felt that I was going to be sent to prison, for some reason I was unable to deal with the situation calmly.

Why is that? As I thought, I seem to be in exceptionally poor form today.

Is it because of my cold?

My throat hurts, my eyes are itchy, I've been sneezing all day, and my body also feels vaguely itchy all over and I have no idea what's going on.

I don't think I have a fever, though.

I don't think that I was unable to deal with the situation calmly because of my cold. Well, understanding that still doesn't do anything to get me out of this situation.

“...Haa.”

I let out a sigh.

That's when it happened.

The moonlight vanished.

“—Hey there, Witch-dono. Is the prison cell to your liking?”

A voice echoed in my jail cell that had become even darker.

It was the calm voice of a woman—I vaguely feel like I've heard this voice somewhere before.

I looked around, but didn't see any people.

“Over here, Witch-dono.”

The voice once again echoed in the cell, but the moonlight returned. It was at the same time that something jumped into my cell through the window above.

“Nyaa~”

The cat that had jumped into my cell made a cute sound and looked over at me.

While waving its two tails in a pleased manner.

“You are—”

“It's been a few hours since we last met.”

Before me was the existence that the people of this city revered and worshipped as a god.

The Cat Cod-sama, or whatever they called it, was here.



Moreover, it just spoke.

.....

You were lazing around in my arms quietly even though you can talk?

Such a wolf in sheep's clothing. Or should I say cat's clothing.

○

The cat looked up at me.

“I’ve finally found you. I’ve been waiting for a human like you.”

After saying that, it tilted its head and said,

“Would you like to make a trade with me?”

In this kind of situation?

“Since you called it a trade, I assume you mean that I stand to gain something from this?”

“Of course. I will free you from this place. That is what you stand to gain. In return, you will have to accept one of my requests.”

“Hoho. What is it that you want me to do?”

“I want you to get me out of this city.”

“—Achoo! ...So my gain is merely a byproduct of your own request?”

“Still, I am the only one who can save you from this place.”

“.....”

“And in return, you are the only person who can save me as well. In short, we both want the same thing.”

“.....”

I don’t understand what this cat is saying at all.

“Umm, how about you start at the beginning.”

“Very well. Are you interested in taking up my offer?”

“It depends on what you have to say. I don’t want to take the most important existence in the country outside without knowing the circumstances.”

I don’t want to increase my number of enemies any more.

“...Fumu.”

Cat God-sama looked down for a while as though lost in thought.

“In that case, let me start from the beginning, as you asked.”

“Before this country fell into ruin, it had a long history spanning some few centuries—”

“It would be helpful you just explain the parts that have something to do with me.”

“Nuu.. Such a selfish girl.”

And then, the cat gave a sigh.

“In that case, I’ll tell you—putting it simply, this present country was formed because of me.”

She started to speak as if remembering something from long ago.

It was the story of this country.

Very rarely, when a cat that has lived for a long time dies while still having an attachment to this world, it is reborn as a monster with two tails.

This female cat was one such being.

Around forty years ago, she was born in this city as a domestic cat. At that time, this country still interacted with the world outside. She was loved by the people, and lived in the country until she grew old.

However, that all ended when she was fifteen years old.

An epidemic spread throughout the country. The people of the country all died one after the other. Her owners were no exception, and they passed away quickly as well.

A prosperous country that had existed for a long time turned into a place without people in just a few years.

This country without people was abandoned and forgotten by the people outside, and she lived here in peace with other cats.

She didn't have any interest in leaving the country. She felt that the country would be taken over by the forest and vanish if the cats were to leave as well. She fervently prayed and waited for people to once again come to this country and make it a lively place again. She kept waiting for a long time.

Very rarely, people would happen across this country, but they would leave after capturing several of her compatriots, the other stray cats, or only stay for a few days before moving on. None of them showed any inclination to settle down here.

She continued to wait while hoping for more people to come. And twenty years after she was born, she finally stopped moving.

It was her time—apparently, she was aware of that. At the very least, she wanted to feel loved by someone again. While holding on to that single regret, she surrendered herself to death's embrace.

And then, she stopped breathing.

Or so she thought.

The next day, she woke up as usual. She wasn't dead. What's more, her old body that had become unresponsive due to age now felt light as a feather. It felt as though she had gone back to when she was still a kitten. What on earth had happened?

Once she stood up, she saw that she now had two tails. Also, she was only able to say “Nyaa Nyaa” before, but now she could speak the same language as humans.

All the other cats had only one tail, but she had two. Also, she could speak. Incredible.

Even though she was still confused, she went to show off her new skills to the other cats.

Ever since that day, the environment around her started to change visibly. The people who came to the country became unable to leave.

For example, a merchant who came to the country for vacation and only intended to stay for a few days. A traveler who got lost and somehow ended up there. Refugees who were driven away from their home countries.

The number of people increased one by one, but not a single one of them tried to leave. Also, they showed a lot more love for her and the other cats compared to the people who had come to the country before.

This must be due to the fact that she now had two tails.

Both the other cats and she herself realized that. In fact, even just lightly touching her caused most people to love cats at a level far beyond what was ordinary.

She had no choice but to use this power. There was no need to hold back, either. If this caused the country to become lively again, she had no reason to hesitate.

Ever since she became an existence different from a cat, the population of the country steadily increased. Most of the people who just happened across this country ended up living here.

Very rarely, there would be a person who was unaffected by her power. After some observation, she found that her power had no effect on people who rejected cats because they were allergic to them.

It took a long time, but the people who had been entranced by her formed a new country.

The people built a new gate, developed the country, and at some point started to worship her as a Cat God because she had two tails.

She continued to live in that country while feeling the love from a large number of people.

And then, twenty years passed since she had been reborn.

“—The population has grown too much. If it grows any more, the country will pop like an overinflated balloon. The country will fall into ruin once again. So, I have no choice but to leave.”

That is the story that she told me.

She said that it was the main reason why she had to leave the country.

“Do you understand the situation now?”

Cat God-sama asked me while tilting her head.

“.....”

In front of her, I sat with my eyes full of tears.

“Ooh, you’re crying for me? You’re a good girl.”

I shook my head and said,

“I’m sorry. I don’t feel like crying, but my eyes are watering anyways.”

“Hmmp. I know. I was just making a joke. That’s one of the identifying features of people who are allergic to cats—you’ve been feeling under the weather ever since you came to this country, haven’t you? For example,

feeling that your body is itchy, or your eyes hurt, you have a runny nose, your throat hurts, you feel sick, and—”

“Achoo!”

“...you keep sneezing. It looks like you’ve already realized.”

“Indeed.”

I nodded while sniffing hard to stop my nose from running. I hadn’t realized that I had this condition because I had never interacted with cats before, and never even so much as touched one.

It looks like I’ll have to avoid being near cats in the future.

“So what do you say? Do you feel like cooperating with me?”

She once again prompted me to answer. Her blue eyes stared intently at me. Seeing her expression, I feel like she was silently saying, “I told you about the situation, so just help me out already.”

“.....”

I looked up as if escaping from her gaze, and shook the handcuffs.

“You’re a cat, right? How do you intend to remove these?”

After hearing that, her eyes widened, and after a little while,

“Fufu. I have a plan regarding that—give me some time.”

Even before she finished speaking, she had already turned around and slipped out through the bars on the cell door.

I had nothing to do while waiting for her to return, so I amused myself by stretching out my legs and tapping my heels on the floor. It also helped to nicely stretch my legs since I had been sitting in the same posture for a long time.

“Can’t you just wait quietly?”

She returned after a short while. Holding a keyring in her mouth.

I expected her to have some brilliant idea because she said that she had a plan, but it looks like she just went and stole the keys. I was a little disappointed.

Just like she had done when she left the cell, she slipped in once again through the bars on the door, walked over to me, jumped up on top of me, and started to claw her way up my body.

Just like before, it was quite painful because of her claws digging into my skin.

“The operation starts at noon tomorrow. I want you to take me out of the country while going on a rampage.”

After reaching my shoulders, she jumped up on my tricorne causing the keys on the keyring to jangle. It felt like I was being pushed down from above.

“Are you sure you don’t want to leave right away? I think it would be much safer to leave the country if we go now.”

“That won’t do. We need to publicize the fact that I have left the country. Otherwise, there might be people who will continue to worship me without realizing that I have left. We need to make the people realize without a doubt that I have left, and then it will be fine if only the people who still want to stay here remain. So feel free to rampage as much as possible.”

“...If I do that, I’ll turn into a wanted criminal.”

“You’re already a criminal. What nonsense are you talking about?”

“Don’t you know? There are different degrees of sin.”

“I’m saying that it doesn’t matter as long as you manage to get away.”

“That’s definitely the thought process of a criminal...”

While making an unpleasant jangling sound with the keyring from atop my head, she snorted.

“I have cheated a large number of people, so I might be a criminal. Although I’m not a person.”

“.....”

Hearing her self-deprecating laughter, I laughed as well.

“I know a foolish person who said that even if you commit sins, it doesn’t matter as long as you manage to run away.”

“...Sounds like that person is pretty strange.”

“Yes. It was a very strange person.”

I heard the sound of something being unlocked above my head.

○

Well, that’s what happened.

After spending the night in the prison cell, we waited until noon and went outside after destroying the prison in an overly flashy manner.

I went on a rampage, and made sure that this incident would be remembered for quite some time, but ensured that no one was actually injured. I flew slowly and at a low height on purpose to make it easy for the people to attack me.

Maybe it was because I spent a lot of time here, but my allergies were getting worse and tears spilled out of my eyes only to be blown away by the wind.

“Dammit! I can’t catch her!”

“Hey! Close the gates! Don’t let her leave, no matter what!”

“Do whatever it takes to save Cat God-sama!”

I was at the center of the vortex of chaos as I sped throughout the city, and my ears were assaulted by the shouts of the people. People jumped out at me many times, but, as expected, none of them managed to touch me.

My chest feels hot as if it's on fire, my eyes are swollen, and at some point the itching had turned into pain. Even so, no matter how bad my condition, I was still a witch. There's no way any of them can catch me.

“Good, good. Go rampage some more.”

However, please fly more safely if possible. That was the unnecessary comment by the cat, who was sitting on my arm, said after her words of praise.

“If I fly safely, we might get caught, you know?”

“What are you talking about? Look, we're nearly at the gates. Make sure you hold out until then.”

“No, that's pretty difficult. I mean—”

Just when I said that,

“Elaina-san! I misjudged you! I already felt contempt for you yesterday, but even so!”

Rushie-san appeared. She dropped in on me from above.

Sitting on her broom with staff in hand, she landed in front of me and blocked my way. She looked like she was guarding the closed gates.

“.....”

So she showed up, as I expected. I was sure that she would come to get in my way. It's a major incident for this city, there's no way she would not come.

She pointed her staff at me.

“Not only were you rude to Cat God-sama, you also broke out of prison! Really, what on earth were you thinking!? I will definitely never forgive you! You will be executed! Guilty!”

She waved the staff.

As if responding to the motion of the staff and her words, a circular portion of the ground immediately below Rushie-san started to glow white with her at the center. The light made an unpleasant sound as if something was boiling, and in the next instant, seven pillars of water appeared and headed towards me at high speed.

“—!”

I avoided them by tilting my broom to the side, but immediately realized that they weren't just made of regular water. Each one of the seven pillars moved independently as if they had minds of their own, and they twisted in the air to attack me again. They're like snakes. The more I avoided them, the more they continued to attack me from all directions.

If I fly upwards, I get a concentrated attack from all directions. If I fly close to the ground, they coil around me and try to close in.

I jumped around here and there like a small insect, and looked towards Rushie-san. She was holding her staff while sitting on her broom, and glaring fiercely at me.

It looks like I can get the attacks to stop for now if I manage to get her staff away from her. Without a staff, a magician is no different from a regular person. There's nothing to fear from them. Well, the same holds true for me as well.

“Umm, Rushie-san. I'm holding Cat God-sama right now. Are you sure you want to keep attacking me?”

“Shut up! Die!”

“.....”

I quickly glanced down at Cat God-sama.

“It looks like she’s not ready to talk it over.”

She was saying something like that, as if this didn’t involve her.

I ignored her, and continued to avoid Rushie-san’s attacks, and then Cat God-sama spoke to me again.

“What are you going to do? Are you just going to stay on the defensive?”

“Both my hands are occupied right now, after all.”

I made my broom fly up to a height where I could look down at Rushie-san—but not high enough to kill me if I fall.

“You don’t have to worry, though. I have a plan.”

“Ho. Judging by the way you said that, I assume you have a brilliant idea.”

“Yes, of course.”

I immediately started to prepare while twisting through the air to avoid the attacking water serpents.

Well, I say preparation, but all I had to do was grab Cat God-sama in my hand.

“Please don’t extend your claws.”

Because that hurts. After I said that,

“.....Huh?”

Her eyes widened as she said that. At the same time, she extended her legs as far as they would go.

By the time Cat God-sama realized what I was planning to do, I had already done it.

“—Hyaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!”

She left my hand, and slowly started to fall towards the ground while yelling. What I did was extremely simple. I don't know if it can be called a brilliant idea, but I simply threw her off the broom.

I wonder if she was disappointed in me because of my simple idea? No, this action is guaranteed to have a great effect on the people of this country.

“Eh? A-Aah! Cat God-sama!”

In that instant, Rushie-san who went into a panic below me weakened her attack on me.

That is exactly what I had been waiting for—I immediately turned my broom into a steep dive. I made my staff appear in my free hand, fired off magic in an instant while aiming it at Rushie-san—and then immediately put my staff away.

The magic I used was a wind-based magic. It whirled like a tornado as it agitated the dirt on the ground, and headed straight for Rushie-san.

“Cat God-sama—eh?”

Rushie-san had extended her hand to catch the falling Cat God-sama, but before she could manage that, she ended up taking my counterattack head on.

Caught in the raging vortex of wind, Rushie-san was blown away while spinning out of control. With a loud noise, she came to a sudden stop as was slammed into a hard object made of iron.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

I flew beneath Cat God-sama who was still screaming and flailing her legs in the air as she fell.

The tip of my broom scraped against the ground as I flew beneath her, and I grabbed her in one hand and held her close.

After she returned to my hands, I could feel that her heart rate was abnormally high.

“...I-I thought I was going to die!”

“It worked, didn’t it?”

“That’s judging after the fact!”

“That holds true for most things.”

I glanced at the gate, and saw that Rushie-san had passed out with her eyes rolled up in her head. After confirming that, I got off my broom.

Some of the people were dumbfounded, and others were still emitting hostility towards me, but they were continuing to surround me.

I put on my best evil expression and spoke to them.

“Right, then. The most powerful witch from this country just lost easily to me. Does anyone still want to have a go?”

The people raised a commotion, but not a single one of them took a step forward. Very wise.

“In that case, I think I’m just going to run away from this country as soon as possible. Now, please open the gates. If you don’t, this cute cat will—you get the idea, right?”

I quickly glared at the gate guard, and could tell that his shoulders were shaking, even under his flamboyant chanimail. He quickly started to open the gates.

The scenery outside slowly came into view.

“Hey, what are you doing? I am going to leave as well. If you’re going to treat me as a hostage, there’s no point in doing all this.”

Cat God-sama raised her voice in protest.

“Don’t worry. I have a plan for this as well.”

“I’m not going to believe in your plans anymore.”

“I’m not going to throw you off the broom this time. Don’t worry.”

One the gate opened fully, I started to walk. I took each step carefully, while paying careful attention to everything around me.

In the end, none of the people tried to do anything to me until I stepped over Rushie-san and out of the country.

Looking around, I saw that the people all had frustrated expressions. Some of them were accusatory, and seemed to be hurling abuse at me, while others had dissolved into tears.

“.....”

After looking at them for a while,

“Well then, we’ll be on our way.”

I mounted my broom after saying that.

I called it a plan, but I was actually just lying.

I didn’t really decide where to go next. I just flew away in a random direction as fast as I could, while holding the black cat.

I flew away so fast that no one would be able to catch up to me.

The agonized cries of the people who had lost their god faded away as time passed and I left them behind.

○

I somehow managed to get away.

I don’t really remember how long I ran.

After getting through the woods and running through the vast plain filled with greenery, we found ourselves in a gloomy forest.

There are no people nearby, and no countries either.

“We should be fine after coming this far.”

We’ve traveled quite some distance.

Looking up, I caught a glimpse of a red sky through the branches.

“Thank you for your help.”

She jumped out of my hands and stood on the ground.

I spoke to her while massaging my sore arms and wiping my eyes.

“What do you plan on doing now?”

“Nothing. I’m just going to live quietly and avoid all contact with people.”

“.....”

“What about you?”

“I’m just going to continue my travels quietly and avoid all contact with cats.”

“That’s good. Make sure you do that.”

She snorted, and I spun around and sat on my broom.

“Well then, I hope we meet again—that reminds me, I don’t know your name.”

“I have no such thing.”

“Weren’t you a pet cat?”

“I already died once.”

So I don’t have a name now—that’s what she told me.

“In that case, would you be willing to tell me what your name was when you were still a regular cat?”

“.....”

After looking conflicted for just a second, she opened her mouth and said her name, just that single word.

It was incredibly ordinary and commonplace, but it was still a good name.

I laughed and said to her,

“It’s a nice name.”

“No one is going to ever call me by that name again, though.”

After saying that, she laughed as well, and turned her two tails towards me.

She turned her neck, looked back at me, and spoke.

“This is goodbye. I should be on my way—I’m glad that you’re the last person that I met.”

After just saying that, she disappeared into the depths of the forest.

I flew up on my broom as well.

I wiped my eyes, touched my sore throat, and flew towards the light.

After I left the forest, I was greeted by the wind on the plains that were dyed a deep red color by the sun that hung low in the sky.



Let’s talk about what happened just over a month later.

I received a summons from a certain country—and because I had promised to return, I once again returned to this land.

I didn’t really have any reason to do so, but I also stopped by at the village where I had told the people about the country full of cats.

I went back there, but...

“Greetings, nyan!”

“.....”

“Traveler-san! Welcome, nyan! This village is a place that has achieved a harmony between cats and the countryside life, nyan! Stay as long as you like, nyan!”

“.....”

They’re talking in a weird manner once again.

Along with that, the village has changed a little as well. I didn’t see a single cat here before, but now cats are popping up everywhere I look.

...No.

More importantly,

“...What on earth are you doing, Rushie-san?”

“.....Please. Just don’t ask.”

The person who greeted me was none other than The Witch of Fair Skies herself. She’s still wearing a robe like she was back when we met in that country, but instead of a tricorne, she’s wearing a headband with cat ears attached to it. She was probably once again forced to do it by the other villagers, but it doesn’t suit her at all. I feel sorry for her. I cannot keep myself from crying at this cruel reality.

Rushie-san lightly rubbed her head.

“Elaina-san, thank you for what you did one month ago. Thanks to that, I came to my senses. It looks like I was acting quite strangely when I was living in that country.”

“I see.”

You still look plenty strange to me—I decided not to say that.

“What happened to that country after I left?”

“Everyone left the country, one after the other. After Cat God-sama was taken away, the people’s love for cats also strangely disappeared—maybe we were

all being controlled by that cat with two tails. There were even people who started to say things like that.”

So, in that case...

“Does that country no longer exist?”

She gently shook her head in answer to my question.

“No. There are still quite a few people there who love cats, and people who really had nowhere else to go, so it’s still functioning as a country. They’re promoting themselves as a country where you can live together with cats, and right now the number of tourists visiting there is gradually increasing.”

“And this place is imitating that country, so that’s how you ended up in such a state”

“.....I brought a few cats back with me because they were cute, but the other villagers also fell in love with the cuteness of the cats as well...”

“I hope it doesn’t cause them to lose their sense of reason.”

“Seriously...”

And then, after a short pause in the conversation, Rushie-san suddenly clapped her hands once.

“Ah, please wait here for a bit, Elaina-san.”

“Hmm? Ah, okay.”

She hurriedly ran off and entered one of the houses. She came back in less than a minute while carefully carrying a large wooden box.

“Elaina-san, look at this!”

She was very excited for some reason, and turned the box towards me.

Looking inside, I saw a number of cats.

The mother cat had a pure white coat of fur. Three of the kittens had fur that was randomly patterned in black and white. One kitten had jet-black fur.

.....

“These kittens are less than a month old. Aren’t they cute?”

Most of the cats looked at me for an instant with a fed-up expression and went right back to sleep, but one of them seemed to have a surplus of energy.

The kitten had black fur that looked like it would be nice to hold and blue eyes. Only this kitten stretched out its legs and tried to get out of the box.

“This one looks pretty energetic.”

I just gave some random praise, but Rushie-san smiled and looked very happy.

“I know, right? Do you want to touch it?”

“No, thank you”

I’m allergic to cats, after all.

“Have you decided on a name?”

“The kittens don’t have names yet—that’s why I’d like it if you picked out names for them.”

“.....”

I replied while looking into the eyes of the black cat that had been born very recently.

“If it’s just one of them, I don’t mind.”

“Which one?”

“This one.”

The black cat with a surplus of energy made a “Nyaa” sound.

“Well then, the name I have in mind is—”

I said it.

I told her a name that perfectly suited the black cat in front of me.

It was incredibly ordinary and commonplace, but it was still a good name.

Epilogue

Clouds floated in the infinitely stretching sky, casting their shadow on the ground.

There was a single tree growing in a spot where the sunlight was conveniently blocked, and the top of that tree was gently swaying in the breeze.

The leaves, agitated by the wind, made a rustling sound as they were blown away from that singular tree standing on that peaceful plain, and flew through the air. The leaves that danced through the air bumped into a certain witch before flying off into the sky once again.

“...Mumu.”

After lightly touching her cheeks that had been brushed by the leaves, the witch looked at the tree that stood before her.

The girl with sleek, long grey hair was a witch, and traveled the world while riding a broom. She wore a black robe and a tricorne, and on her chest was a star-shaped brooch that signified she was a witch.

She looked at the lonely tree and muttered “Mumu,” while twisting her neck. She remembered seeing this tree before, that stood calmly amidst a patch of flowers.

After moving under the tree and getting off her broom, she remembered where and when she had seen this tree before.

“This is the same tree that I took shelter from the rain under.”

She remembered the scenery that was visible from that spot. It had started to rain while she was in the middle of her travel, so she had rested in this place for a little while.

It appears she has returned to this place once again.

Remembering the sight she had previously seen from this spot, her lips loosened slightly.

After that, she got on her broom once again and floated up into the air.

The view before her was colored in a pale green and a vast blue.

It was beautiful.

It was an ordinary scene, one that you might see anywhere. Even so, it was so beautiful that it took her breath away.

“.....”

However, the girl didn't stop here like she had done in the past. It was not raining this time, after all. There was no reason to stop.

Instead of just gazing at the beautiful scenery, it would be far better for a witch and a traveler to travel amidst that beautiful scenery.

She slowly floated around the tree as she considered where to go next.

However, she gave up on that halfway through as she found it annoying, and once again returned to the sunlight after moving away from the tree.

The fluttering leaves beneath her were gently glittering as if welcoming the witch. The wind was gently blowing as if it was caressing her.

This commonplace scenery greeted the witch as it had several times before.

It was as if the scenery was inviting her to places she had not yet seen in this world that seemed to stretch out infinitely in all directions.

“...I wonder what kind of place the next country is.”

The girl whispered to no one in particular.

She doesn't know the answer. And because she doesn't know, she wants to know it.

The witch continued her journey through the gentle breeze with just a little excitement in her heart.

Who was she, you ask?

Why, it was me, of course.

Afterword

It is nice to meet you, or perhaps it has just been a while. I am Shiraishi Jougi.

I have recently become a full-fledged member of society. When I was young, all the working adults looked like perfect and wonderful people to me, but now that I am part of that society, I see that it is not overflowing with wonderful people as I had thought, neither have I become such a person myself. It is just my environment that has changed, and I have not drastically changed in any way, and even though I have become an adult, I earnestly think that I will remain true to who I was unless I intentionally make the change.

With that out of the way, I would like to thank you for purchasing Volume 2 of 『Majo no Tabitabi』 .

Just like the first volume, there were meetings between different people, a story that formed from that, and then they went their separate ways... I understand that just having that as a single template might become boring! Because I was afraid of it being seen that way, I decided to change the idea behind Volume 2 a little. Also, she was previously just flying through forests, so I decided to change the scenery up once in awhile to give a sense of the seasons as well. Due to that, Elaina-san ended up having to endure marching through snow-covered countries and deserts in the span of a single volume.

Also, the time I spent writing the manuscript for the second volume was something like a preparatory period for my first year as a member of society. Maybe because my misgivings about my new lifestyle had accumulated to such an extent, or my worries about the world I was living in had finally reached a peak, all the stories I submitted to my editor ended up being dark themed.

Due to the fact that all my stories were so dark in nature,

“Jougi-san, have you gone over to the dark side? Are you okay?”

I also worried my editor who then asked me such things. I am fine. I am doing very well. Incidentally, some of the stories that were too dark were edited to be a little more mild and included as a part of this book, and some of them were cast into the deepest pits of hell (meaning they were rejected).

Now, it is time to say thank you.

My editor, M-sama. Thank you for saving me when I was about to go over to the dark side. May the Force be with you.

Azuru-sama. Thank you for continuing to provide the cute illustrations and character designs after Volume 1... Princess Chocola's cuteness was especially lethal. I was about to fall in love. But that would be yuri. Goddamnit.

Finally, I would like to thank all the people involved in the publication of this volume, and also all of the readers who read this book through its end, including this afterword with no real content. Thank you all so much.

....I still have a few lines left, so I will post some spoilers from the next volume (assuming there will be one).

A person called Shiraishi Jougi is reincarnated into a world from the present age. However, this person is not conveniently given cheat-level powers, nor are they served by beautiful women. They only happened to come from a world where the culture had advanced to a fair degree, so they don't have any technical skills either. In the first place, they don't even speak the same language. Due to these reasons, they die of starvation after a few days.

I will be writing a story that ends in such a manner. As I thought, a change in environment will not cause the true essence of a person to change as well. I plan to make the story end with such a punchline.

Of course, this is a lie. In case there is another volume, let us meet again!

Author:

Shiraishi Jougi

After dirtying the toilet of a pub by vomiting, they ask to borrow a mop but only get a hand towel. Story of my life.

Illustrator:

Azuru

My remaining goal for this year is to properly digest all the games that have been piling up.

Translation Notes and References

1. ↑ A reference to William Tell. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Tell
2. ↑ A reference to Nasu no Yoichi's feat in the Heikei Monogatari. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nasu_no_Yoichi
3. ↑ Ashes is written as (灰) and Charcoal is written as (炭). As you can see, the kanji are pretty similar.

Credits

Author: Jogi Shiraishi

Illustrator: Azul

Translator: Nazo

Editor: Aardvark

Compiled by Ice Phantom